Fire Inspector I & II

CHAPTER FOURTEEN
WRITING REPORTS AND KEEPING RECORDS

Part 1

Slide 1	Welcome to chapter 14 Writing Reports and keeping Records. As a fire Inspector you are expected to not only be able to evaluate and identify life safety concerns in buildings, you are expected to be able to document your findings in a professional manner. Your written report must be accurate, timely, well-presented, accessible, and relevant. This chapter will provide you with the information you require to make sure your reports reflect the high degree of professionalism you have brought to the rest of the inspection.
Slide 2	In this chapter we will discuss information gathering, report writing, communication barriers, effective communication methods, common fire inspection methods, record maintenance, legal evidentiary presentations and compliance with Freedom of Information and Privacy Act requests.
Slide 3	Fire inspections are intended to be a proactive process, not only identifying fire code contraventions, but also used as an education vehicle for building owners and occupants. Your ability to clearly identify and describe the observed deficiencies, supporting code references for your concerns and provide the building owner and occupants with understandable direction on how to resolve the problems is critical to an effective inspection. Compliance with the fire code to improve occupant safety is your primary goal as a fire inspector. One of the things you have the most control over during the process is the effectiveness and accuracy of your documentation and file management practices.
Slide 4	Your fire inspection report is an essential part of your inspection. Your report should be clear and concise. It should provide an accurate and understandable outline of your findings and provide the building owner clear direction on how and when they are expected to remedy the situation. These reports form an essential and frequently the only record of the issues, including those that were corrected during the inspection. These reports form a foundation of information that can provide important background information for future inspections and may inform fire prevention and awareness programs or influence operational programs like preplanning.
Slide 5	Every fire inspection no matter the situation or occupancy must have a written road map of documentation created. Frequently, inspectors use notebooks and digital or smartphone cameras for the initial documentation.

	Many fire departments also use a standardized checklist which, when used along with other standard documents, aids in maintaining uniformity and helps the inspector to capture all applicable areas that must be examined during a fire inspection. Used properly, these can be powerful tools that greatly increase your likelihood of a successful compliance process. No matter the forms and process, this documentation needs to be consistently used and be filled out completely and legibly.
Slide 6	A fire inspection form is one element of a complete documentation process. Fire inspection documentation including field notes and observations, is a written log of what you witnessed, your observations related to the issue and how it came to your attention. These early documents are an important part of every aspect of the inspection, whether it informs other reports and orders or provides support to testimony in court or other legal proceedings. Fire inspections may also inform future code development processes. Likely one of the most important indirect benefits of a well-documented fire inspection is the contribution to making firefighters safer. A good inspection will not just reduce hazards in the building but will also reveal dangerous materials or processes that are inside the building that can guide pre-planning and awareness.
Slide 7	Your fire inspection records are governed under freedom of information and privacy legislation applicable in your jurisdiction. While the acts vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, there are basic similarities between them all. Your reports, notes and photographs are official records and should be included in the authority's records management systems and policies. Personal information contained within your records is protected against unauthorized use or release. This means that information collected in the inspection can only be used for the purposes it was collected. Where files have been requested, personal and protected information must be protected prior to release. Most privacy legislation includes a mechanism for others to gain access to these records. Your organization will likely have a defined process to evaluate the request, compile the required records, screen them for protected information and get it to the requester. It is important to understand that these requests will include access to your notebooks, drawings, sketches, photographs, reports, correspondence including emails, text messages and any

	other record related to the inspection or file. It is important to maintain a highly professional approach to all records, no matter the medium. It is the inspector's responsibility to seek out and understand the freedom of information and privacy legislation, regulations, and policies in their jurisdiction.
Slide 8	Fire inspection records need to comply with the records retention policies of their jurisdiction. In some areas, retention periods are created through government legislation and in others it is left to the discretion of the local authority. Either way, the inspector is responsible for ensuring that they are aware of the rules and that they are followed. Critical information related to inspection histories, changing occupancies and ownership and other important matters should be protected to ensure the life cycle of the building in question is maintained. These retention requirements should be explained in the local authority's records management policies. The emerging use of performance-based codes makes these records even more important. The records of the initial solution and the efforts made to maintain them form a critical source of information for future inspectors. This ensures the building remains safe and that the alternate solutions are considered in future redevelopments and renovations.
Slide 9	An inspection is a point in time snapshot of a building and its condition. Done properly, an inspection record that includes field notes, sketches, photographs, inspection forms, communications with the building owner as well as other documents will provide an accurate description of the building at the time of inspection. These records can inform many other fire department processes. They can support preconstruction plan reviews for new projects or modifications to the building. They will certainly guide and inform future inspections of the building and will provide essential support to ongoing compliance processes including follow-up inspections. This can include administrative reviews, regulatory appeals, and court actions. Inspections should also be linked to fire department operational pre-planning processes to ensure they remain current and reflect current hazards.
Slide 10	Fire investigators will be keenly interested in the inspection history of a building during their investigations. The activity related to the building, its processes and compliance history can provide essential insights into risks and potential fire causes. A good inspection file will include lots of information on

	processes and potentially flammable or combustible materials in the building, detailed compliance history, sketches, and pictures of the building layout. Inspections should also inform department priorities for a wide range of programs. Fire inspections should drive information management processes to produce trend information on the types of issues being identified in a community. Inspection records should be able to produce dependable and accurate statistical information that will identify issues and suggest priorities for prevention, awareness, and compliance programs. Training of new inspectors should start early in a fire fighters' career. This process can be made much easier with a strong program containing good inspection records and files. The new inspectors will have a rich resource to build and learn from.
Slide 11	Reports generated from the inspection process originate in generally three ways: Initial Inspection – Your department may have a proactive inspection program and you as the fire inspector are assigned different building inspections to complete. Re-inspection – Most deficiencies identified in an inspection will take some time for the building owner to resolve. Some of these will be resolved by professionals who will provide a compliance confirmation. Others will require a reinspection to ensure the building owner has corrected the identified issues. Complaint – At times you may receive complaints from the public about an occupancy believed to have fire code violations. Most fire departments have formal processes to receive, assign and follow up on these complaints. These complaints may come in written or verbal format. While the risk of malicious or erroneous complaints is very real with verbal complaints, there is a significant risk to ignoring them. A good program should provide clear advice to the inspector on how to properly manage these complaints. However, the complaint is received by the Department, careful attention to clarifying the issues and documenting actions is essential to ensuring the complaint is handled properly and professionally.
Slide 12	Documentation of your inspection is one of a fire inspectors core duty. Documentation starts with the exercise of your entry authority. Different jurisdictions have different rules. Others who review or use your inspection report for any purpose should clearly understand how you gained entry, even in those situations where initial entry authority was denied.

	Your documentation is a record or narrative of your observations, "what you saw" throughout the inspection. A general rule of thumb is, if you don't document it, you didn't see it or it didn't happen. Make sure that your documentation is complete and thorough. Some key areas to document are: • Fire code violations and noted deficiencies • Upkeep and housekeeping of equipment, processes, and operations • Any noted modifications to systems or equipment The storage, handling and use of hazardous materials
Slide 13	Written records provide evidence of fire and life safety hazards that you have discovered during your fire inspection. Written documentation also highlights fire code compliance and/or deficiencies. Identified deficiencies need to be clearly and accurately documented. These observations should include the required corrective actions that must be taken to resolve the issue. You must support your observations and compliance directives with accurate references to the fire code, building code, or other enforceable document like an NFPA standard adopted in your jurisdiction or local bylaw. Mistakes in finding and relaying the correct code reference and language calls into question your professionalism and could cause problems during appeals or court proceedings. For example, Section 6.2 of the fire code is entitled Portable Extinguishers and states that "Portable extinguishers shall be inspected, tested and maintained in conformance with NFPA 10, "Portable Fire Extinguishers. So if you are asking for a portable extinguisher to have a specific inspection performed, such as a 6 year internal examination, you will have to refer to NFPA 10 for the details. Make sure that you explain your findings in a manner that informs the building owner and provides clear and easily understood directions to correct the issue.
Slide 14	As a fire inspector your job is to ensure fire code compliance. If you find violations your job is also to work with the building owner or occupant to have any noted violations corrected. Most building owners want to protect the people in their building and their investment and will cooperate when provided with reasonable direction. Keeping this in mind is crucial and can aid in you achieving compliance. A suitable time frame must be given to the building owner to ensure non-compliant building issues are corrected. These timelines should be reasonable and reflect the relative severity and risk presented by the deficiency. A missing

	fire alarm system report in an otherwise well managed building may have a longer timeline for compliance that can be discussed with the building owner. Missing smoke alarms in apartments should have a very short compliance time due to the severe threat to life that this represents. Simple things like improper extension cord use or blocked fire exits may be resolved during the inspection. Be reasonable and very explicit when impressing what needs to be corrected.
Slide 15	A fire inspection is a complex process requiring the fire inspector to consider a wide range of things like building occupancy and layout, potentially hazardous processes and specialized contents, fire code requirements and possible deficiencies. It is impossible for you to accurately remember everything you've noted during a fire inspection so it's very important to document everything you observe including those things that may require corrections according to applicable fire code references. It is essential that fire inspectors develop strong documentation skills that should include the use of field notes. These notes should be started as you go through the inspection and may be completed before you leave the scene. Most inspectors will be dealing with multiple files making it easy for files to become confused if memory is your only documentation. Written documentation ensures an accurate recollection of the inspection and your observations. Field notes will provide you with an important tool that demonstrates your commitment to delivering a professional outcome that supports your report writing and sharing your findings with the building owner.
Slide 16	The worst outcome a fire inspector can have is the failure to have deficiencies resolved because we didn't do a good job in documenting our findings. Many of the issues you will be dealing with could have a direct life safety risk for building occupants. There are many tragic examples of the potential impact of poorly documented fire inspections. In 2016 a fire named the Ghost Ship Warehouse Fire occurred in Oakland California. This fire resulted in 36 deaths, many injuries and was the deadliest fire in the United States since the Station Fire in 2003. The city had received numerous complaints about the building dating back to 1998, including electrical, illegal construction and many fire safety concerns. Numerous lawsuits, including one against the city followed. City Council recognized publicly that city officials "need to enforce the codes that we have"

	and that "we should have been more assertive in the past". The city also paid $33 million dollars to the victims as the civil lawsuit. You must factually, clearly, and accurately document every fire inspection. Simple or complex inspections should follow the same processes to ensure that you deliver a consistent inspection program that adheres to best practices, is unbiased and achieves the objective of fire safe buildings.
Slide 17	The point of an inspection is to communicate facts. Emotions, including frustration, have no place in your reports or documentation. Remember too, that your report is intended to inform and direct a building owner who will not be a fire code expert. Write plainly and avoid using slang, jargon, acronyms or other specialized language. Use language that conveys your thoughts in a manner that is professional and clear. For example, "I've told them over and over" is a poor choice in wording. A more professional approach would be to note "repeated reminders" related to the thing or process in question. Describe spaces and areas as you see them. "Small hole in the wall" is not an accepted descriptor for a small apartment or store. This can be difficult for people to understand, particularly where the building owner's primary language is not English. If you are trying to gain compliance with a building owner, describing an action as "a dumb thing to do" is not likely to get their cooperation. Simply noting that the approach did not meet fire code requirements is accurate and professional and has a much higher likelihood of gaining their support and cooperation.
Slide 18	A very important quality of documentation and report writing is the proper use of grammar, spelling and word usage. Avoid being too formal in your report writing and avoid using multi-syllable words that the reader may not understand. A lack of understanding by the reader may result in noncompliance. Write professionally, state the facts, state the corrective actions required. Be aware of the needs of the building owner and their ability to understand and interpret the materials you are giving them. Cultural and language barriers are a significant concern in the life of a modern fire inspector.
Slide 19	A common communication barrier is clarity of the message being conveyed. Generally, your message will be clearer if you strive to be concise. Use short

	sentences and “normal” language. Avoid technical jargon and acronyms. Acronyms in particular are dangerous as they mean different things to different people. For example, the acronym CAFC can mean the Canadian Anti-Fraud Centre, Canadian Association of Fire Chiefs, Charlton Athletic Football Club or the Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit (US). Use the full name to ensure the right meaning gets through. A successful report will be written to the audience it's intended for. Always remember that you are writing a technical fire code compliance report for people with limited technical knowledge. Your messaging should provide clear and concise direction to the building owner, linked to the fire code and it’s much more technical language. Simplify your message, use fewer words and as much as possible, approach your reports with a “write like you speak” attitude. Remember, you are serving people who are not code experts and are depending on you to translate complex fire code requirements into instructions they understand and can implement.
Slide 20	No report should leave your desk without a thorough review of grammar, punctuation, and spelling. Most reports will be prepared on a computer and most programs have grammar, punctuation, and spell check. Use these tools. Your documents are part of a legal process and should be treated as such. Simple mistakes can have big implications affecting what you are trying to say. A misplaced comma can completely change the meaning of the sentence. For example, the absence of a comma in this sentence “Let’s eat Grandma” changes the meaning and intent of “Let’s eat, Grandma”. Spelling errors that make it off your desk suggest a degree of sloppiness and will affect the perception of your professionalism.
Slide 21	Note taking is a critical part of report writing and ultimately forms the foundation of your documentation responsibilities as a fire inspector. There is no “right” way to do note taking. Most inspectors recognize that stopping to jot down key words through the inspection is critical to recording their observations and thoughts. Simple diagrams can illustrate the observation and should be part of your process. Once you have completed your walk through and before you leave the facility, take the time to complete your field notes and observations.

	Because field notes are part of the official record of the inspection they should be treated as professionally as any other part of your documentation. Field Notes should be structured in an orderly manner, be a complete record of your inspection and observations, be legible and relatively free of spelling and grammatical errors. Keep them professional. Your field notes can become part of an appeal or court action and you want your words to reflect your professionalism.
Slide 22	Field notes should be as clear and concise as the report you will write at the conclusion of the inspection. They should inform and be reflected in your final report. Discrepancies between field notes and your final reports can be hard to explain and may throw your entire inspection into question. Modern technologies that include inspection software and more portable computers, tablets and smart phones are improving and simplifying field note taking. While simplifying field note taking, they do create challenges in terms of records retention and need to be retained and treated the same as paper records.
Slide 23	The use of a recording device takes practice and care. Like any skill, practice makes for a better and more professional outcome. Remember to speak clearly and slowly and enunciate your words. This becomes important when you are transcribing your notes and when you or others are reviewing your recording. As with written notes there should be no confusion or uncertainty about what you are trying to communicate. Software applications exist that will do voice to text or take pictures and allow the addition of voice notes. These are only valuable if you take the time to integrate them into your systemic approach to inspections. Practice will be a big part of that. Your recorded field notes are part of the official record of your inspection and will need to be produced for appeals and legal proceedings. When using a recording device to note field observations avoid using technical jargon, slang terms and questionable statements that may offend another person listening or reading the transcribed documents from your recording. Whatever solution you choose, make sure that you support it with a well thought out and consistently applied procedure.
Slide 24	It is often said that a picture is worth a thousand words. This is very true for fire inspectors. Sketches, diagrams and photographs, done and managed well,

	can help communicate complex issues to those who will need to see and interpret your reports. They can provide a clear visual depiction of your findings and provide support to your written documentation.
Slide 25	Field sketches are a rough outline drawing of the room or building that is being inspected. While it is not essential to draw the sketch to scale, it should accurately reflect the general size relationships between the spaces being drawn. It should be reasonably detailed and provide an accurate illustration of how the space looked. Don't leave things out of your sketch and make sure you note the fire code deficiencies in relation to the space.
Slide 26	Terminology is important and includes understanding the difference between sketches and diagrams. Sketches are your rough drawing of the area inspected. It is not expected to be to scale and will be freehand. Diagrams are the final inspection drawing. Diagrams are generally drawn to scale and include precise measurements and applicable information. In the rare circumstances that a diagram cannot be drawn to scale this must be noted on the diagram. You must also include the use of a standard mapping symbols to show the different safety and emergency features within the area inspected. It always best to use recognized symbols. For the purposes of consistency consider using the symbols provided in NFPA 170 Standard for Fire Safety and Emergency Symbols to illustrate these features.
Slide 27	Your diagram must also include a legend for easy reference when a third-party individual is looking at the diagram. Make sure to reference any Standards, like NFPA 170 that you used in your diagram. When completing your diagram legend make sure that it is not cluttered, particularly where you are referencing other information and standards. The whole point of the legend is to assist others understand what you are trying to

	share through the diagram. Clutter will make it more difficult for the building owner and others understand and interpret diagram.
Slide 28	We noted before that a picture is worth a thousand words. This is really true in the case of conducting a fire inspection. Fire inspectors can build a complete file of information supported by pictures almost immediately as they walk through a building. Be systematic in your photography. You should start with the exterior of the building. Once that has been documented move inside and follow a logical pattern. For the file and pictures to be of value they need to be logged with a note explaining what they are of and where they were taken. Pictures should be numbered in sequence as they were taken. Many departments have adopted the Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, Delta system to describe the sides of a subject building. Your numbering sequence may look like this: Photo 1, Exterior, Alpha Side Storage Container; Photo 2, Interior, Bravo Side Corridor Doors. The log should clearly indicate who took the pictures as well. The purpose of the log is to take memory out of the mix which will help reduce errors. The log will provide a logical and step by step illustration of your inspection and your findings.
Slide 29	Sketches and diagrams provide the broad context about the deficiencies and observations you have made through your inspection. Photographs will provide the fine detail that the drawings cannot. A photograph that is carefully composed and part of a properly logged report will be very helpful to others, including the building owner. This room is easily described as “cluttered”, but the photograph clearly defines the clutter as unsafe and containing materials that cannot be stored in this space.
Slide 29	In this part we discussed: • Written documentation and need to comply with the policies of your jurisdiction • The importance of filed notes • Sketches and photographs • The inspection forms • Communication with the building owner
Slide 30	Please move on to part two.