

**A CRIME SCENE INVESTIGATOR IS LIKE A MASTER PUZZLE MAKER. LOOKING FOR PIECES, PIECING THEM TOGETHER, AND USING THEM TO SOLVE A CRIME ARE WHAT MAKE THE JOB CHALLENGING AND REWARDING.**

Deciphering, observing, and untangling information and evidence at the crime scene provides the prosecutor what he needs to do his job – convict the guilty. In previous columns (Forensic Magazine June/July and August/September 2005), I talked about the importance of documenting, by means of a checklist, everything you see and everything that goes on at a crime scene. This is particularly true of a death scene.

Last issue, I covered how to record information relating to the coroner, body removal, and body identification. I then detailed how to record information if the body is found in a structure. What about bodies found in the water? In a vehicle? In an open area?

**Body Found in Water**

When dealing with a body found in or near the water, the first thing to do is record information about the location. What is the water type? It may be a pond, lake, river, creek, or other. If the body of water has a name, list that as well. Note specifically the location of the body, such as the name of a cove.

Next, you want to document the location relative to other things. This can give clues as to how the body got to its present location. Record the nearest structure over the water. Perhaps there is a bridge or train trestle. Could the body have been thrown? Could the victim have jumped? The name of the nearest road and its distance from the scene should be noted. Use observation or technology such as a GPS to measure. Record your method. Find out the location of the nearest boat ramp. There is always the possibility that the body was transported to its current location by boat.

Observe the air and water more closely. Document the temperatures of both and the depth of the water. Record if there is any current and in which direction it is flowing. Can this help you determine where the body was put into the water? Note the condition of the water: muddy, cloudy, or clear. You may need to check with the local weather bureau to determine the time and amount of the last precipitation.

Next, record the location of the body in the water. Is the body in the water? If so, how far is it from the shore or bank? If you consider it partially in the water or on the bank, note that. Document your observations of the bank. Is it comprised of sand, rock, gravel, dirt, or grass? How high is it? Is there a large drop off? Observe the body position. Is it floating, submerged, on its back, face down, or other? The amount of time a body has spent in the water can affect its position, so this may be a critical piece of the puzzle.

As is the case with any body, no matter where it is found, record the condition of the body. This should include notes on the level of preservation of the body (preserved, decomposed, skeletal), color, and levels of lividity and rigor. Record the presence of blood, ligature marks, and whether or not anything is tied to the body. Document if the body has any clothing and jewelry. Is there any other clothing found in the area?

Divers are often called into death scenes when the body is found in or around water. Your initial observations can give them some clues as to where to search for evidence. You will want to record all pertinent information about the divers. This should include the names of the divers and their agencies. Note the date and time they went into the water and emerged. Describe any items the divers recover and their location in the water. Make sure you note which diver found which piece of evidence.

### **Body Found in Vehicle**

If a body is found in a vehicle, document as much as possible about the location. Remember that jurisdiction is sometimes questioned, so make sure you accurately record where the vehicle is found. Note the address and specifically whether it is in a parking lot, roadway, field, driveway, or other. What is the surface condition on which the vehicle is parked? Note whether it is asphalt, concrete, gravel, dirt, or grass. Record the distance to the nearest residence or business. Who lives there or owns the building? You may be able to determine whether the victim went off the road. Record the name of the nearest road and its distance from the scene. Again, use observation or a tool such as GPS.

Next you want to carefully document as much as possible about the vehicle. Record information specific to that vehicle including tag number, VIN, odometer and trip meter readings, labels from a service station, and personal details of the registered owner (name, address, phone, lien holder). Describe the vehicle. How many doors? If it's a pickup truck, what type of bed does it have? Record the make, model, and year as well as the color and any distinctive markings.

Concentrate next on accurately describing the condition of the vehicle. Are the doors and windows open or closed? Locked or unlocked? Broken? Describe any damage to the vehicle. Is there any evidence of a crash? Does the car have a manual or automatic transmission? Is it in gear?

What is on and running? Are the keys in the ignition? Is the engine running? Answers to these questions may be puzzle pieces and help you determine whether this death was suicide, accidental, or other.

Note whether or not the radio is turned on. Document the station to which it is tuned. If the owner is a country western fan and the station is hard rock, you may have a critical clue.

Your record of the time of day and the state of the lights can help determine the time of death. Document which lights are on: headlights, parking lights, turn signal, or dome lights. Many new cars are equipped with running lights and automatic shut offs, so this can be misleading.

Record the condition of the battery and tires. Perhaps they are even missing! Note the reading on the gas gauge. Check out the ashtray. If there are cigarette butts, record the brand.

The entire vehicle will be inventoried for its contents. Note on your checklist that this was done and by whom. Do the same of a diagram of the vehicle.

Be specific as to the location of the body. Is it in the front seat, back seat, driver's side, passenger side, floor, trunk, etc? It may be outside the vehicle. Include in your documentation the position of the body (sitting, lying, on back, face down, right side, left side). Note whether or not a diagram was made of the position of the body and its location relative to the vehicle.

Once you have documented the vehicle and location, describe in detail, the condition of the body. This is done using the same parameters as when the scene is a body of water.

### **Body Found in an Open Area**

The record an investigator makes of the location of a body found in an open area can be critical to the prosecution of the accused. The specific location, including address, should be documented. Likewise, detail the condition of the area. Is it paved, gravel, dirt, grass, rocky, or wooded? Is water nearby? Write down the type of water (lake, creek, etc.). Record the distance to the nearest residence or business and the name of the resident or owner. What is the name of the road nearest the location the body was found? What is the distance from the road to the scene? Find a reference point such as a mile marker, bridge, or road intersection. Remember, investigators and attorneys will need to be able to find the area. Record whether or not a diagram was made to show the location of the body and by whom.

As is the case with any body, record the position of the body and whether it was diagrammed. Record the condition of the body using the same guidelines as I detailed above for a body found in or near water.

I can't stress enough the importance of maintaining a checklist when investigating a death scene. It reminds you to look at everything, even when you are distracted. It becomes a guide when piecing the puzzle together. It helps to eliminate the questions.

The ideas presented here are meant to be general in nature. Keep in mind that key to any successful crime scene investigation is close attention to the statutes

of the jurisdiction in which you are working. Following such laws and guidelines regarding the collection of evidence may mean the difference between a successful prosecution and the guilty going free. Work closely with you local prosecutor and coroners.

My first two columns on using a death scene checklist can be found at [www.forensicmag.com](http://www.forensicmag.com). In the next issue, I'll continue the discussion as we further explore how to document scenes and bodies. More information on my death scene investigation checklist can be found at [www.csigizmos.com](http://www.csigizmos.com).