

**THE TECHNIQUES OF  
OBSERVATION AND  
LEARNING RETENTION**

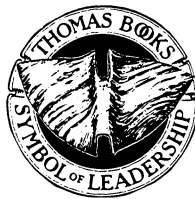


# THE TECHNIQUES OF OBSERVATION AND LEARNING RETENTION

A Handbook for  
the Policeman and the Lawyer

*By*

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## PREFACE

IT is generally recognized that there is a tendency to take the process of observation for granted when in point of fact, accurate observation is one of the most difficult skills to develop. Insufficient training in the techniques of accurate observation and learning retention is in part responsible for a significant number of overturned or lost convictions and dropped charges in the courts each year due to the vagueness and/or ambiguity in reporting what has been observed relative to alleged criminal acts. Presumably the training of additional members of our judicial system in these techniques will eventually permit courts of law to bring into evidence testimony that otherwise would be inadmissible. It is hoped that this handbook will play some small part in bringing about a more equitable administration of criminal justice in this regard. It is also felt that this handbook will prove to be a valuable tool in the hands of a field policeman, especially in the area of surveillance. In addition, it will aid him in preparing to testify in a direct, authoritative manner without the use of notes in a trial situation.

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**THE TECHNIQUES OF  
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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

THE development of this handbook was motivated by the fact that since anyone can observe, there is a tendency to take the process of observation for granted. In fact, accurate observation is one of the most difficult skills to develop. It took painters thousands of years to learn to portray depth and perspective accurately. Why? Because it is extremely difficult for a person to distinguish between what he actually sees, and what he thinks he sees.

We cannot experience reality directly; we can only perceive reality indirectly through our senses. The senses and the nervous system select, modify, and transform perceptions so that what ends up in the brain is only an approximation of what exists in physical reality. Why? Not only because of the way our sense organs and nervous system work, but also because of the fact that we are creatures of habit. We have inherited customs and traditions; we have developed likes, dislikes and prejudices. In addition, we have formed opinions and built up expectations about the world around us. Thus, we often see what we expect to see or want to see rather than what is actually there.

Good observation means casting aside, as much as possible, ingrained habits and attitudes; it involves keeping observation separate from evaluation, and keeping evidence separate from conclusions or opinions. In learning to be a good observer, you must be ready to change old habits of perceiving and be willing to learn better techniques.

Every individual carries with him a set of values, attitudes and biases which he has learned during his lifetime and these affect the way he perceives things. This is likely to be especially true when the observer is personally involved. Unconsciously, he may ignore relevant aspects of the situation, or report them with a slant, and/or pay special attention to an unimportant aspect. A good example of the effects of values on perception was noticed in an

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experiment when a group of rich children and a group of poor children were asked to estimate the size of coins. When drawing them, the poor children consistently drew the coins larger than they actually were. Apparently, the coins had greater value for the poor children, and thus they overestimated their real size.

Observing, learning, and remembering are so much a part of everyday living that it may appear ridiculous, on the face of it, to attempt to write a handbook on the subject. However, poor ability to observe, inefficient learning practices, and failure to remember are probably more characteristic of everyday living than their opposites. Much of our whole legal system – rules of evidence, the jury system – is designed to deal with the fact that people observing the same events do not see the same things. Basically, observing, learning, and remembering are skills which are learned and most people probably do not develop these skills at any level near that of which they are capable. For that reason, if the performance of your job depends on your ability to observe, learn, and report accurately, then it makes sense to find ways of improving your ability in these activities.

##### *Purpose of this Handbook*

For those whose jobs depend upon their ability to observe accurately, there are techniques and procedures that can be learned and practiced which will materially increase their ability to observe, and later report what they have observed. The purpose of this handbook is to provide information about these procedures and techniques. This does not mean that a casual reading of this handbook will make observing easy. But the reader should become aware of the difficulties involved in observing and memorizing, and learn how to avoid some of the pitfalls. With the proper application of the techniques and procedures described herein, he will be able to increase the probability of becoming a successful observer.

##### *How to Use this Handbook*

This handbook has been divided into three major parts, each of

which should be read carefully by the observer. The first part consists of Chapter II entitled *About Observing: The General Process of Observing*. This chapter briefly describes a number of factors involved in the observing process. It takes you through the different activities that must be performed in order to complete a successful assignment, defining each activity and giving examples of them. The second part contains three chapters: *Orientation*, *Techniques of Search*, and *Techniques of Active Learning and Retention*. This is a “how-to-do-it” section, which includes examples and simple exercises that can be performed with a minimum amount of time and equipment. Wherever possible these examples and exercises have been taken from everyday experiences and are intended to aid the observer in gaining insight into the principles of accurate observation, retention, and reporting. The third part consists of independent training exercises which provide practice in skills which may be of special importance in a particular assignment, such as learning to estimate size and distance, and increasing memory span for a series of digits. The observer should familiarize himself with all parts of this handbook. In preparation for a particular assignment, he should organize his practice sessions around those parts of the handbook which are most relevant to that assignment.