



Perfect the Word

LESLEY JONES: FICTION EDITOR

You're nicked! At-a-glance notes on police rank structure and terminology for UK crime writers



Do you know your FBI from your NCA? Your ADW from your GBH? Your MP from your misper? Your DA from your CPS?

This post is not in any way intended to discriminate against authors who want to write about crimes in any other country. I am confining myself to UK terminology because I am British; I trained as a solicitor in the UK (specialising in crime), and come from a family of lawyers and police officers. Neither is this post to be considered a definitive guide to terminology. There are many learned books on this subject and dozens of resources on the internet (for details see 'Further reading' below – and don't forget you can approach the public relations departments of police forces for help, too). This is rather a taster and hopefully an inspiration to discover more. I've only taken the suspect's journey as far as arrest. Much of what follows that stage is

available to anyone who seeks it on the government and the CPS (Crown Prosecution Service) websites, and those of solicitors specialising in criminal law, and again, it's important to get it right! I find I often have to provide information the author could have found themselves with a little research, and I hope that after reading this piece you will know where to look.

Police procedurals, thrillers, murder mysteries and cosy crime are some of my favourites genres both for leisure reading and for editing.

But what about a novel where the author's research has been based on their knowledge of the police hierarchy and procedure of another country, as depicted in television drama? Readers can be put off an otherwise well-written novel by inaccuracies of this type. The last thing you want are reviews from people with the requisite knowledge that will then deter other prospective readers (purchasers). How often have you heard the phrase 'write about what you know'? The danger is writing about what you think you know. If you decide to write about a subject your audience is likely to know more about than you, you're likely to trip up. Even when writing a fantasy (my other favourite genre), the author has to stick to the rules, even if they have invented them themselves (ah, world building. A subject for another article). So, whether you're a pantsner or a planner, make sure your infrastructure doesn't let the plot down.



Many of the most popular TV dramas come from the US, plus others from all over the world. Modern UK crime drama tends to be fairly accurate (think *Line of Duty*), but even those make good use of poetic licence. If a screenwriter stuck fast to laid-down procedure the viewer would probably switch off before things got really exciting, so they, like great crime writers, use correct procedure as a framework. However, my own experience tells me that many beginner crime authors use US crime drama as their knowledge base. The first thing to remember is that the legal systems of the US and the UK are not the same. This isn't the time or place to go into detail about those legal systems worldwide that follow the UK system – but there are several. Not only that, but both the US and the UK systems have evolved over the years so, if you're writing anything even vaguely historical (say, pre-1984) you need to know the historical differences. There is a huge amount of information available on the internet from police forces including the Metropolitan Police (which has a slightly different rank structure at the top), many specialist books, and even Wikipedia. I don't normally recommend the latter as a primary source, but their articles on police organisation are generally good, and the one on police ranks (below) includes information on historical ranks. The Metropolitan Police and local forces have glossaries on their websites easily accessible by the public, dealing with everything from ABH to YOTs (see Further reading).

And now your at-a-glance reference table of police ranks:

Uniformed police ranks and abbreviation	Metropolitan Police (uniformed) ranks and abbreviations	Criminal Investigation Department (CID) ranks & abbreviations
Constable (PC)	Constable	Detective Constable (DC or Det Con)
Sergeant (Sgt)	Sergeant	Detective Sergeant (DS or Det Sgt)
Inspector (Insp)	Inspector	Detective Inspector (DI or Det Insp)
Chief Inspector (Ch Insp)	Chief Inspector	Detective Chief Inspector (DCI or Det Ch Insp)
Superintendent (Supt)	Superintendent	Detective Superintendent (DSI or more likely Det Supt)

Chief Superintendent (Ch Supt)	Chief Superintendent (Ch Supt)	Detective Chief Superintendent (DCS or Det Ch Supt)
Assistant Chief Constable (ACC)	Commander	
Deputy Chief Constable (DCC)	Deputy Assistant Commissioner	
Chief Constable	Assistant Commissioner	
	Deputy Commissioner	
	Commissioner	

Very Important Note: the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) has the same rank structure as uniformed with the word 'Detective' before the rank. A detective is not superior to a uniformed officer of the same rank (although they do have to pass extra exams to be accepted into CID). A detective would not be addressed as Detective Flintstone as they might be in the US. (Just an additional note – you will sometimes find uniformed officers in plain clothes working alongside CID officers, but they are not technically detectives; they're plain-clothes police officers.)

So what do we call them? And what do they call each other?

Rank	What they are called by inferior ranks	What the public call them
Police or Detective Constable	n/a Officers of the same rank who know each other will probably just address each other by name, or as [Rank] Surname if they don't	Officer, Constable, Detective Constable or Constable Bloggs (not Detective Bloggs or just Detective as in the US)
Sergeant or Detective Sergeant	Sarge (sometimes Skip)	Sergeant or Detective Sergeant
Inspector	Sir, Ma'am or Guv	Inspector or Detective Inspector
Chief Inspector	Sir, Ma'am or Guv	Chief Inspector or Detective Chief Inspector
And so on ...	Guv would be less likely towards the higher ranks	

Police officers speaking to each other refer to the police force (their employer) as 'the job', or just 'job'.

So, our suspected perpetrator is arrested. If you're going to quote the caution, make sure you get it right. In the UK we don't 'read him his rights'. Next stop (assuming the novel is current) is usually the custody suite. National police forces each have several designated custody suites which are usually separate from the police stations that feed them. For example in Cheshire (where I'm from) there are 17 police stations with front desks or help desks, 5 police stations without front desks, but only 3 custody suites for what is quite a large county force. A custody sergeant is in charge of the arrival and settling in of the detainee, and if the arrestee wants a solicitor one will be called (either of his choice or the duty solicitor). In short, if you want your fictional suspect detained, put them in a custody suite rather than a police station. What does the custody area look like? Cells are not surrounded by bars and are not in view of



the custody area. The cell area looks pretty much like the one in this photograph. Interview rooms are in another part of the suite. If the detainee is seen by their solicitor it will be in a private consultation room away from the cell area, as are the interview rooms – where there is a lot of scope for the crime writer for plot development!

I'm not going into any more detail here with regard to the procedure once a person is in custody – there is copious information available on the government's website and those of local police forces. The author's role is to use the correct information for the geographical setting of their novel as a skeleton (pun intended), and build the body (pun also intended) of their story around that.

Further reading

The Crime Writer's Guide to Police Practice and Procedure – Michael O'Byrne, Hale, 2018

Being a Detective – Stephen Wade and Stuart Gibbon, Straightforward Publishing, 2019 (not as well written as O'Byrne's book but contains some useful stuff)

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Police_ranks_of_the_United_Kingdom – useful for current and historical ranks

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Law_enforcement_jargon – gives UK and US acronyms

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Criminal_investigation_department – information about the history, development and current set-up of the CID in the UK. Also has some references to other countries

<https://www.gov.uk/browse/justice/rights> – government website about rights and the law

<https://www.cps.gov.uk/> – the CPS website

<https://www.askthe.police.uk/content/Q300.htm> – this page is on police ranks, but the whole site is searchable

<https://www.met.police.uk/foi-ai/af/accessing-information/met/glossary/> – the Metropolitan Police's glossary

<https://cheshire.police.uk/about-us/freedom-of-information/abbreviations/> – Cheshire Police list of abbreviations (all forces will have one of these)

<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780192807021.001.0001/acref-9780192807021> – Oxford Dictionary of Law Enforcement, available online and in print

<http://library.college.police.uk/docs/npia/AirwaveSpeak-National-User-Guide-2007.pdf> – a very long PDF with lots of info about airwave speak. Use with caution and check elsewhere unless you are sure – this version was last updated in 2007 and I haven't found a more up-to-date one

<https://www.getsurrey.co.uk/news/uk-world-news/police-slang-revealed-including-codewords-15262202> – article available on multiple local newspaper sites on police slang

And many, many other books and websites with a huge amount of information just waiting to be raided by the aspiring crime writer.

Lesley Jones is a fiction editor specialising in (but not limited to) crime and thriller, fantasy and sci fi, whose mission it is to help independent authors on their publishing journey. She is an advanced professional member of SfEP, a member of ACES, and a partner member of ALLi.

Send me an email: lesley@perfecttheword.co.uk or visit my website www.perfecttheword.co.uk

