Build an Incident Log That Another Person Can Follow

A disciplined log turns a difficult sequence of events into a record with dates, observations, files, and context that can be reviewed without guesswork.

An incident log, clock, pen, and evidence folders. Original TargetedArmy editorial image generated for this guide.

START WITH THE PURPOSE

Make the record readable before making it exhaustive

An incident log is a timeline, not a running argument. Its first job is to preserve what happened, when it happened, what you directly observed, and which files or witnesses belong to the entry. A short record made the same way each time is more useful than a long entry whose structure changes with stress or fatigue.

Choose one notebook, document, or trusted local workspace. Record the time zone on the first page and use the same clock for every entry. Give each incident a stable identifier such as 2026-07-16-01 so photographs, audio, measurements, messages, and later notes can be connected without renaming original files.

THE CORE ENTRY

Record observation first and interpretation second

Write the start and end time, location, people present, environmental conditions, and the exact sensation, sound, device behavior, message, or event you observed. Use concrete language: duration, direction, intensity on a defined scale, visible changes, and the sequence in which things occurred.

Place explanations or suspected causes in a separate field labeled interpretation. That separation does not erase your conclusion. It lets a later reader distinguish the event from the reasoning attached to it, compare entries over time, and identify which parts can be checked against other records.

- Date, start time, end time, and time zone
- Exact location without exposing it in public copies
- Direct observation in plain language
- Files created and their original filenames
- Witnesses or ordinary equipment operating nearby
- Interpretation, follow-up question, and next safe step

A practical detail view supporting the article procedure.

PRESERVE THE FILES

Keep originals untouched and work from copies

Transfer original media to a controlled folder as soon as practical. Do not trim, enhance, rename, convert, or annotate the original. Create a working copy for listening, viewing, redaction, or sharing. Record the original filename, byte size, creation time shown by the device, transfer method, and a SHA-256 checksum when a reliable tool is available.

Back up the original folder to a second device you control. A checksum can show that a byte-for-byte copy has not changed; it cannot establish who created the file, what caused the recorded event, or whether a device clock was correct. Preserve context alongside the checksum instead of asking one technical value to carry the whole account.

REVIEW WITHOUT RELIVING

Use a scheduled review to find patterns and gaps

Review entries at a regular interval rather than continuously. Look for missing times, repeated locations, ordinary equipment cycles, sleep disruption, medication changes, weather, power work, alarms, network outages, and other conditions that may explain part of a pattern or identify the next measurement worth taking.

If an event involves immediate danger, serious injury, severe pain, confusion, or sustained sleep loss, protect the person first. Contact emergency services or a qualified medical professional when needed. Documentation supports care and investigation; it should never delay urgent help or require a dangerous confrontation.

HANDOFF

Prepare a one-page summary for the next reader

When sharing the record with an advocate, clinician, attorney, technician, journalist, or official, lead with a one-page summary: date range, number of entries, primary observations, strongest linked files, known limitations, and the question you want that person to address. Keep private addresses, medical details, and unrelated names out of public versions.

A clear log cannot decide causation by itself. It can establish a durable chronology, protect original material, show how observations were recorded, and make responsible follow-up possible. That is real investigative value.

Sources

1. NIST SP 800-86: Guide to Integrating Forensic Techniques into Incident Response. National Institute of Standards and Technology 2006

https://csrc.nist.gov/pubs/sp/800/86/final

Editorial Notice

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