

OSAC REVIEW SPRING 2025 (OSAC = Organization of Scientific Area Committees)

NAME OSAC UPDATE #24: OSAC 2023-N-0002 (OSAC Proposed)

Standard for Scene Documentation Procedures

This Standard was developed by the Crime Scene Investigation and Reconstruction Subcommittee of OSAC. It has been submitted to a standards development organization and may change as it undergoes revisions in that consensus-based process.

(Like all OSAC developed Standards, Best Practices, and Guides, these are voluntary and separate from NAME standards and accreditation.)

This is a brief summary of OSAC 2023-N-0002, and as such may leave out or misinterpret important details. See link to full document (below).

As part of OSAC standards development, this document was subject to an open comments period with comment adjudication. This is a link to the comments received with adjudication:

<https://www.nist.gov/document/osac-2023-n-0002-comment-adjudication>

Value:

This *Standard for Scene Documentation Procedures* is primarily for crime scene investigators but overlaps with our Medical Examiner work. The responsibilities of crime scene investigators and death investigation authorities at death scenes varies from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, sometimes because of differing law. Most death investigation authorities document scene findings separate from law enforcement, and the documentation focus in death investigation may differ from law enforcement's. This standard could be used as a training document for medical examiner staff. The general principles in the standard also apply to medicolegal death investigators.

Note: The phrase "Death Investigation Authority" has been substituted for "Crime Scene Investigators" and similar terms several places in this summary.

Scope: Proper scene documentation ensures the integrity of the documentation from the point of recording. It encompasses written or typed material, imagery, and diagramming. This standard describes the minimum requirements for documentation including purpose, considerations, and preservation.

Definition of datum: “A reference point at a scene from which measurements are taken (OSAC Lexicon).”

Scene Documentation is essential to scene investigation and reconstruction. All scenes shall be documented using an established protocol. Documentation provides a detailed record of observations, aids in report writing, can assist in testimony, and allows for an independent review by others.

- Documentation shall be saved per death investigation authority retention policies that comply with jurisdictional law.
- Documentation includes written records, notetaking, imaging, and diagramming.

Scene Investigative Reports (Documentation) Shall Include:

- Names and contact information of involved persons
- Scene physical location and description
- Environmental conditions
- Description of any collected evidence with chain of custody
- Date of investigation
- Identification of investigator
- Arrival and departure times
- Unique case identifier
- Clarification of the completeness of a set of notes (such as page number)
- If abbreviations are used, their meaning should be contained in the report or described in office policy

- Handwritten documentation shall be created in permanent ink, except when creating a rough diagram

Preservation of Documentation:

- All documentation created as part of an investigation shall be maintained, and retained according to death investigation authority policy.
- Any alterations to the original record shall be made without obliteration, so the change is readily visible. The person making the alteration (initials, name, signature, etc.) shall be recorded. “ If the change is not contemporaneous, the date of the change shall also be recorded.”

Imaging:

- Images should be a fair representation of the subject or scene.
- “Settings on devices that record the date and time an image is captured shall be monitored and adjusted for accuracy.”
- The sequence of image capture should include long-range/overall, mid-range, and close-up images.
- “Information pertaining to imaging setting/parameters is typically captured in the Exchangeable Image File Format (EXIF)/metadata.”
- The photographer’s identity shall be documented.

Preservation of Imaging:

- Original scene images shall not be deleted, even poor quality or unintended images.
- Original scene images shall be stored, maintained and archived to minimize damage, destruction, or loss.
- Any copying of images will use methods and devices that minimize the potential for alteration, destruction, or loss.

Diagramming:

- Diagrams create a visual depiction of spatial relationships and orientations
- Scene diagrams can be hand-drawn or computer generated.

- On-scene measurements are collected to give spatial meaning to diagrams.
- “Measuring equipment shall be capable of achieving the accuracy necessary according to the intended purposes of the diagram.”
- Diagrams shall also include:
 - A legend if the diagram includes symbols
 - A scale (if used). “Not to Scale” if a scale is not used
 - Direction or orientation, if applicable
 - Datum, if relevant
- Diagrams shall be preserved and archived as per policy of the death investigation authority.
- Non-permanent writing instruments are acceptable when preparing a hand-drawn draft. Eventually the hand-drawn draft should be made permanent by preparing a photocopy, scan, or photograph.

Full Document:

<https://www.nist.gov/document/osac-2023-n-0002-standard-scene-documentation-procedures-version-20>