

Reports have many names, purposes and structures, and are usually written to specification. Reports can be analytical, informative, integrated or technical and they should be logical, clear and accurate.

GENERAL REPORT STRUCTURE

The following list indicates the normal order of items in a report:

- title page
- abstract
- table of contents
- introduction
- body of the report
- conclusions and recommendations
- references
- appendices.

Please note that this is only a general guide to report structure. Follow the guidelines given by your lecturer, and remember to ask for clarification if you are unsure about what you are required to do.

INFORMATION NEEDED

Lecturers requiring written reports normally provide you with this information:

- the topic or subject of the report
- the required length and due date
- a clear idea of its purpose and its audience
- the structure: headings to be used and their order.

Many lecturers also provide a detailed format including information about abstracts, summaries, conclusions, recommendations, and how these are to be presented.

ASK YOURSELF THESE QUESTIONS:

- What exactly is the report about? What is it designed to achieve? What is its scope or range? What actions might follow from it?
- Is it objective? Are opinions and interpretations appropriate?
- What subject area criteria or views need to be considered?
- Are there any theories, subject bias, ethical views or assumptions I need to bear in mind?

BEFORE RESEARCHING

Write a sentence or thesis statement clarifying the subject and purpose of the report. This will be useful when you write a report.

NEW INFORMATION

Some reports require new information. Plan experiments, interviews, measurements, questionnaires and other research methods carefully. Consider time-lines, length, costs (if applicable), methods and any problems that may arise. Make sure the data will be complete well before the due date of the report. Request help from your lecturer in designing methods and approaches if you are uncertain about these.

INFORMATION FROM LIBRARY SOURCES

If the report requires the collating, synthesising or interpretation of information already published in books, journals and media, reading for a report is similar to reading for an essay:

- Read only what you know is relevant.
- Try to write brief notes: either short acknowledged quotations, or **information in your own words**. This helps you to understand the material and to avoid plagiarism.
- Keep accurate bibliographical details of all your sources as you read.
- Contact your liaison librarian (under 'Information Services' on the Library home page) if you are having difficulty locating relevant information.

WRITING THE DRAFT

If you have been provided with headings, use these to form the structure of your report. Decide on a numbering system before you start writing the draft. A decimal numbering system is generally used, for example:

- The title of the first main section is numbered 1.0
- The first sub heading is 1.1
- The second sub heading is numbered 1.2
- The title of the second main section is numbered 2.0
- The first sub heading is 2.1
- The second sub heading is 2.2
- The first part in the second sub heading is 2.2.1
- The second part in the second sub heading is 2.2.2

Most reports require an impersonal passive style, for example, 'The statistics were presented to the committee', rather than 'I (or we) presented the statistics to the committee'. If you are not sure which style is best for your report, check with your lecturer.

If you need to express uncertainty or doubt, you can use the modal verbs 'may', 'might' or 'could', or adverbs such as 'perhaps' or 'possibly'.

You may choose to use tables, graphs and diagrams, if these are appropriate for your topic.

EDITING

It is important that your report is presented in a clear, straightforward manner. Make sure that:

- the data and facts you have presented are accurate.
- any data has been analysed in accordance with your report guidelines.
- your conclusions and recommendations follow logically from the data.
- all tables, graphs, diagrams and charts you have used conform to your lecturer's guidelines.
- you have fully met the requirements for this report.
- your references (in-text and reference list) are accurate and complete.
- the word count (using 'Word': Tools → Word Count) is within the range required for this report.
- you have formatted the document in line with your lecturer's expectations.

PROOFREADING

After editing, proofread your report as you would proofread an essay:

- Check for spelling, punctuation, grammar and expression mistakes.
- If you are aware of the mistakes you usually make, look for these mistakes first.
- If you are unsure, ask someone else to proofread your work.
- Number each page (using 'Word': View → Header and Footer) and staple the essay pages together at the top left hand corner.
- Save the document to your computer, flash-drive or other memory device.

REFERENCES

American Psychological Association 1994, *Publication manual of the American Psychological Association*, 4th edn, American Psychological Association, Washington.

Barrass, R 1978, *Scientists must write: a guide to better writing for scientists, engineers and students*, Routledge, London.

Counsell, J 2006, *Technical report writing*, University of Tasmania, viewed 15 October 2006, <http://www.international.utas.edu.au/studentSupport/elsis/pdf/Writing_a_technical_report_2005.pdf>.

Winckel, A & Hart, B 1996, *Report writing style guide for engineering students*, 3rd edn, University of South Australia Faculty of Engineering, Flexible Learning Centre, Adelaide.

Windschuttle, K & Elliot, E 1999, 'Reports: research and analysis', in *Writing, researching, communicating*, 3rd edn, McGraw-Hill, Sydney.

FURTHER READING:

The Learning Centre: the University of New South Wales 2005, *Report writing FAQ*, viewed 30 August 2006, <<http://www.lc.unsw.edu.au/onlib/report.html>>.

Detailed guidance of how to write the various sections of a report (including examples)

Uni Learning: the University of Wollongong 2000, *Report writing*, viewed 30 August 2006, <<http://unilearning.uow.edu.au/report/1d.html>>.

A helpful guide to language use in report writing

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