Focus on Report Writing

A report is the write-up of an investigation.

It sets out:

- why the investigation took place;
- how it was carried out;
- what the findings were;
- what action is recommended as a result.

As a student you will probably need to write one at the end of a practical or research project. In employment a report is used for the same purpose. It is:

> *'a communication… from a person who has collected and studied the facts, to a person who has asked for the report because they need it for a specific purpose'*. (Stanton, 1990)

How is a report different from an essay?

In purpose
A report needs to finish with clear recommendations about what action is suggested as a result of the findings.
An essay is unlikely to need such an important and emphatic conclusion, (depending on its title).

In structure
A report has headed and numbered sections so that any item in it may be found quickly, and read separately. Information which is not vital to an understanding of the report is included in an appendix at the end.
An essay is written in continuous prose, and is meant to be read from beginning to end because that is the way its theme develops.

In style
A report is written in the third person (avoiding 'I', 'we' and 'you'). Its style is direct and brief because it needs to be read quickly.

It is written in the passive voice, e.g.
- *'The survey was carried out', not,*
- *'I carried out the survey'*.

An essay, too, is formal and usually written in the third person, but there might be times when a more personal approach is needed. For more information on essay writing, see the Focus on essay writing series.

The structure of a report

Unless you have been given specific instructions, it's a good idea to follow the generally accepted standard structure. Alternatively, you may be given a 'house-style' to follow. This is often the case in employment, where organisations have evolved formats which suit their purpose. Either way, the information needs to be organised logically.

The standard structure has these sections, in this order:

- title page
- summary
- contents page
- introduction
- main body of text (with sections/chapters to suit your material)
- conclusion
- recommendations
- bibliography, if appropriate
- appendix/appendices

Page layouts

- A report looks more professional if word-processed
- pay attention to headings/sub-headings, margins and spacing of sections
- avoid decorative fonts – even on the title page

Standard report structure

If you have not been given other instructions, this is suitable for student reports. The main sections are listed below, in the right order:

Title page
Show report title, author's name, date, the person/organisation for whom the report has been written.
If the title is not set, create one which is brief, straightforward and factual.

If there is a limited readership – (a business report may be confidential) – it should say so on the title page.

Summary
Put the summary at the beginning of the report, to be easily accessible.

Write it as a precis, or abstract, of the whole report (including the conclusion and recommendations) – so it cannot be written until last.

Ensure that it makes sense on its own, and gives a brief but accurate account of what the report contains.

It is usually no longer than one paragraph, so that it can be read quickly.

Contents page
Place the contents page after the title page and summary. Unless you have been given other instructions, list the different sections of the report, in the order in which they appear.

Show numbered section headings/sub-headings and page numbers.

The words 'Introduction', 'Conclusion', 'Recommendations', 'Appendices' can all be used as headings – but 'Main Body of the Text' cannot. Instead, be specific about what is in the main body of the text, by giving an appropriate title to each section/chapter; then list and number these.

- Long sections need to be sub-divided, for clarity.
- Specify what the appendices are, and list them.
- Specify what the illustrations/figures are (if any) and list them. Use of figures – diagrams, graphs or charts – is recommended in a report, because information presented thus is often quicker and easier to read.
- Where there are many appendices/illustrations, list them separately.
- The numbering system starts with the introduction and finishes with the appendices (if used).

Example of numbering system for the Contents page

There is more than one approach to numbering the contents of a report. The decimal system is perhaps the most familiar:

		page
1	Introduction	1
2	Chapter heading	2
2.1	Section heading	3
2.1.1	Sub-heading	5
2.2	Section heading	8
3	Chapter heading	11

The advantage is that section/sub-section numbers contain the chapter number; so the reader always knows which chapter/section they are in.

Introduction

Keep it as brief as possible – usually one paragraph is enough.

Explain why the report is needed. You could include:

- terms of reference
- aims and objectives
- methods used in the investigation
- necessary background information
- definitions of any abbreviations used throughout the report
- acknowledgements (as distinct from Bibliography)

Main body of the text

The substance of the report: investigation or research, and its findings.

- Organise your material logically into chapters or sections, sub-dividing as much as possible.
- The sections should be large enough to contain an idea or theme, but small enough to be manageable. Don't number every sentence.
- Make chapter/section headings explicit – to describe the content.
- The section numbers must appear next to the headings throughout.
- Use figures/diagrams/charts as much as possible. This makes good use of space and presents the information more accessibly.
- Keep to the essentials. Extra material can be presented as Appendices

Conclusion

Draw together your findings.

- If you started with a hypothesis, show why that is upheld or not.
- Avoid introducing new material here – add it to the main text instead.
- Depending on the subject of the report, a long conclusion might need to be reviewed to make sure all the material is appropriate to this section.

Recommendations

Specify your recommendations for future action.

- Consider what recommendations arise from what you have written in the previous sections of the report: their relevance needs to be clear.
- Present them as a numbered list for easier reading.
- The conclusions/recommendations could be together in one section.

Bibliography

For correct forms of citation, see the Library Guides on referencing available at **www.library.dmu.ac.uk/Support/Guides/index.php?page=359**

- You should use the system required by your faculty, check your handbook if you are unsure.
- List all sources used: for quotations, ideas, or background reading.
- References in the text should be clearly traceable to items in the bibliography.

Appendices

Include any documents or information which add to the reader's understanding of the report.

- They should be given numbers and titles and listed in the contents.
- Refer to them in the appropriate place(s) in the report, otherwise their relevance will not be clear.
- If your report is word-processed, it is unlikely that you will also be expected to word-process the appendices.

© DMU Centre for Learning and Study Support (CLaSS), Libraries & Learning Services. All rights reserved.

Issued: 09/12 PC2350