

REPORT WRITING

This is a general hand-out on report writing. It should help you write up the reports required for assessments. It is unlikely that you will need to include every element listed below for all the reports you write at university. By working closely with the assignment specifications you will be able to identify what to include and exclude.

1 Definition

A report could be described as a formal statement of the results of an investigation, or of any matter on which definite information is required, made by some person or body. Reports may be presented orally or in written form. In a report situations are analysed, conclusions drawn, alternatives considered and recommendations made. Reports are concise and have a specific structure. A good report is one you don't need to reread to understand the point. Modules which require you to write reports give you practice in presenting information in a way relevant to employment.

(Reports are different from essays. Essays use information to explore ideas and arguments. Their main purpose is to demonstrate that the student can practise skills and abilities in presenting a persuasive case.)

2 Purpose of Reports

2.1 To share information

Large organisations rely more on the written word than smaller organisations where information can be passed on verbally.

2.2 For decision making

Reports are the basis of significant decision making in industry, commerce and public services.

3 Advantages of reports for communicating information

3.1 Practical for large groups

Information can be transmitted without gathering everyone concerned together at once (cf meetings).

3.2 Readers can go at their own pace

The receivers of the information can take it in much quicker, reading at twice the speed of listening.

3.3 The information can be presented objectively

Heat and emotion can be removed from the subject.

3.4 Arguments can be presented coherently

A structured format is available to present a case backed up with facts and figures.

4 Written style and presentation

Care with presentation can make a vast difference to the professionalism and appearance of a report. A well presented report written in an objective, factual and logical style, and which is easy to read, is more likely to be accepted than a report which does not meet these standards.

4.1 House rules

Some organisations may have house rules which determine the format and written style of a report. This may be to promote a corporate image within the organisation or to allow ease of comparison of similar subjects year to year.

4.2 Length

The length of the report should be appropriate to its purpose. A short report should be concise, a long report should be comprehensive. Whatever the length, the material contained should be relevant. The writer should be selective in preparing the report: often some material gathered in the process of preparing the report is not worth including in the finished piece of work.

4.3 Headings

Headings should be meaningful so that the reader can interpret them correctly and find information required quickly. Imprecise headings such as "Other considerations" can be infuriating! The headings should follow a logical order.

4.4 Layout of text

Closely typed long paragraphs should be avoided. The text should be broken up and present a neat, well shaped layout with headings, sub-titles and indentations.

4.5 Binding

The report should be neatly bound in a format that makes it easy for the reader to consult. The title of the document should be clear.

4.6 Numbering

In long reports paragraphs are often numbered for easy reference. It is most usual for the decimal numbering system to be employed (2, 2.4, 2.4.1, 2.4.2 etc.).

5 Components

The components of a report normally conform to a standard pattern of presentation. This is because they are conventional working documents which must be easily consulted for specific information. The standard pattern of presentation of a report aids the report reader in the same way that the layout of a recipe book helps someone who is cooking. This inevitably leads to repetition, but this is desirable (unlike in a novel). For example a conclusion is justified in the main text of the report and then given again in the Conclusions section.

5.1 Title page

The title page should be on a separate sheet. The title should help people who have to identify and retrieve the report, for example for filing, and should not resemble the title of another report. With the title should be the name of the author and the date of completion. The appearance should be neat, uncluttered and businesslike.

5.2 Summary/abstract

The summary/abstract should be written separately from the report. It gives a brief and factual survey of what is contained in the report itself with the material summarised in the same order. It should give readers enough information to assess the importance of the material and its relevance to them.

5.3 Table of contents

The table of contents should be on a separate sheet of paper listing the contents chronologically by page number. The titles of each section should make it informative.

5.4 Introduction

The purpose of the introduction is to let the reader know what the writer is driving at, and what the line of argument is. The necessary background should be stated with an obvious statement of intent and an indication of how the subject is to be developed. The aim is to give the reader an initial frame of reference to assist comprehension and assessment. This should explain why the work was undertaken, the scope of the work and the limitations (such as time, personnel and material) imposed. Care has to be taken to avoid giving the conclusions of the report here. It is important that the introduction is used to introduce the content of the report itself: it is a common mistake for students to use the introduction to introduce the topic, rather than what follows in the text.

5.5 Main text

The main text should be divided into numbered sections with appropriate and informative headings. The sequence should be logical, although not necessarily chronological. The body of the report should contain a description of all investigations carried out, a statement of facts discovered, clear arguments and opinions arising from the investigations and the facts uncovered by them. Illustrations related to the text should be placed where they make numerical or descriptive information easier to understand and remember.

5.6 Conclusions

Conclusions should be firm, unqualified statements summarising the findings and inferences of the sections of the main text. No new ideas should be introduced at this point, but it is acceptable to hint at recommendations.

5.7 Recommendations

Recommendations should be stated with the readership in mind. There is no need to justify them. That should already have been done.

5.8 Acknowledgements

The acknowledgements section may come after the title page. It should give credit for

personal help given, stimulating and influential ideas, and permission to quote from unpublished work.

5.9 References and bibliography

References to publications (and interviews if appropriate) will have been made in the text. They should be listed in a references list. A separate bibliography may also be included to cite all material used in putting together the work (whether this has been referred to in the main text or not). Students should follow a recognised standard for referring to other work, such as APA.

5.10 Appendices

Appendices should contain relevant detailed and/or descriptive information which, although likely to be of interest to the reader and supporting the conclusions, would interrupt the flow of the argument if included in the main text. Appendices should not normally be longer than the report itself.

6 Common mistakes students make in report writing

Students regularly make mistakes in their work which lowers its quality and affects the final mark. When you proof read your work check that none of the errors outlined below have crept into your work. Your work is not ready to be handed in until it is proof read, corrected, proof read again and, if necessary corrected once more for another proof reading. When planning out how much time you need to complete your assignment you must include time for proof reading.

6.1 The impersonal writer

You should write impersonally in reports. This means that the word "I" should not appear in your work. You should aim to write using the passive voice. So instead of writing: "I have shown that electronic mail is a good medium for communicating across time zones" you should write: "It has been shown that electronic mail is a good medium for communicating across time zones".

6.2 The report format for reports, the essay format for essays

The structure of a report should be evident through the use of numbered headings and sub-headings. (In contrast, the structure of an essay should be evident through the line of argument in its content. Essays therefore do not usually come with headings).

6.3 The introduction

Remember that in the introduction you should be introducing the *content of the report*. A common mistake is for students to use the introduction to introduce the subject for discussion. So, for example, a report on the use of computers at the British Library would have an introduction explaining the scope of the report and what is to follow. It would not explain what a computer is, nor what the British Library is.

6.4 Include all relevant sections

Stick closely to the assignment specification. For example if you see that 10% of the marks are for a bibliography of the material you consulted in preparing your report,

make sure that you include it. Missing out specified material is a daft way to lose huge chunks of marks.