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A quick guide to report writing



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What is a report?

The essence of the report is that it is designed to deal with the real world. Specifically, a report is a clearly structured document that presents information clearly and succinctly. Reports should be easy to read and presented professionally. Reports are used to help make decisions or account for actions and use research to make recommendations.

There are many different types of reports including business reports, scientific lab reports and case study reports. The common feature of all reports is that they are structured into sections with headings.

Why write reports?

Whilst essays are theoretical and discursive, reports are designed to be practical, evaluative and analytical. Reports give you practice at developing different aspects of your written communication skills. More importantly perhaps, there are two characteristics to reports that make them significant for you:

- Reports on courses model the reports we will write in our jobs. Writing reports at university therefore prepares us for the work we will do.
- Reports also model academic journal articles. Writing reports at university can be academically challenging and may prepare us for publishing our own research.

Why write reports: explain the world or change it?

There are three main forms of reports: factual, instructional and persuasive; each has a different purpose and will require different arguments and evidence to achieve that purpose. It will help you write good reports if you know what you are trying to achieve before you start your report.

Factual	Instructional	Persuasive
The factual or informative report is expected to define or establish a current situation. The school report might fall into this category.	The instructional, explanatory, report is supposed to explore a situation and suggest a range of options for further action. The 'Which?' report might fall into this category.	The persuasive or leading report is supposed to investigate a problem and suggest a specific course of action. A surveyor's report might fall into this category.

The line between these reports is blurred, but do try to set your goals before you start your own report.

Differences between reports and essays

	A Report...	An Essay...
Function	<p>Presents information</p> <p>Is used to make decisions or account for actions</p> <p>Is meant to be scanned quickly by the reader</p>	<p>Presents an argument and is idea-based</p> <p>Used to demonstrate knowledge, understanding and critical analysis</p> <p>Is meant to be read carefully</p>
Structure	<p>Formally structured</p> <p>Uses numbered headings and sub-headings</p> <p>May not need references and bibliography list</p> <p>Uses short, concise paragraphs and bullet points</p> <p>Uses tables and/or graphs and bullet points</p> <p>May need an abstract (also known as an executive summary)</p> <p>May need to be followed by recommendations and/or appendices</p>	<p>Semi-structured</p> <p>Uses minimal sub-headings and bullet points</p> <p>Always requires references and a bibliography</p> <p>Rarely uses graphics</p> <p>Offers conclusions about a question</p> <p>Will only need an abstract if very long</p>

How do I analyse my task?

Analysing your task is very important. If you haven't got a clear picture in your mind of where you want to go, planning the report is going to be difficult. So, here are some questions you should ask yourself:

- Do you understand the **type** of report needed?
- Do you know **how big** your report needs to be?
- Do you know **what is required** in the report?
- Who is my **audience**? (E.g. lecturers, assessors, managers etc.)
- What is the **problem/question**?
- What is the **aim** of the report?
- What **key points or issues** need addressing?
- What **information** do you need to collect?

How do I consider the audience?

As you write, ask yourself:

- **Why** have they asked for a report?
- **What** do they need to know?
- **How** will they use the report?

Now that you've got these basic ideas in mind, how and where will you find the relevant information?

Types of Report

	Literature	General Scientific	Chemistry	Laboratory	Non-scientific	Standard Business	Research
1.	Title page	Title page	Title page	Title page	Title page	Title page	Title page
2.	Abstract	Abstract	Abstract	Introduction	Introduction	Executive summary	Executive summary
3.	Introduction	Abbreviations	Abbreviations	Materials and methods	Main body of text	Acknowledgements	Introduction
4.	Main body of text	Introduction	Introduction	Discussion	Conclusion	Table of contents	Method/methodology
5.	Conclusion	Materials and methods	Results	Conclusion		Main body of text	Results/findings
6.	References	Results	Discussion			Conclusion	Discussion
7.		Discussion	Materials and methods			Recommendation	Conclusion
8.		Acknowledgements	Acknowledgements			Bibliography/references	Recommendation
9.		References	References			Appendices	Appendices
10.						Glossary	Bibliography

Sections of a report

Research reports are the most common type of report. The table below outlines the requirements of the different sections. Although this table is concentrating on a research report, many of the sections are applicable to other types of reports.

Sections of a Report		
Section	Features	Ask yourself
Title	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Title of report Name of student/author Course/Organisation Date 	
Table of contents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lists the content of the report Page numbers 	
Executive Summary (Abstract)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Summarises the whole report in a logical order Outlines purpose, research methods, findings and recommendations Written in past tense No more than a page Written last 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are the aims of the purpose of the report clearly stated? Are the results summarised? Are the limits outlined? Are the important concepts and terms defined?
Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Outlines context, background and purpose Defines the terms and sets limits of the research 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is the purpose of the research clearly stated? Is the context and background explained? Are the limits of the study outlined? Are the important concepts and terms defined?
Method	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explains the research methodology and methods used In scientific reports, you details the experiment procedures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are the research techniques/methods clearly outlined?
Results/Findings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Present the findings/results You can use visual data, such as graphs, tables etc Facts only, do not interpret 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are the results clear summarised/stated? Are you using tables and graphs etc appropriately?
Discussion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interprets and evaluates results Analyses results 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are the results explained and interpreted? Are the results linked to other similar research and to each other?
Conclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Brief summary of findings Relate your conclusions to the objectives Do not introduce new information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are the results summarised?
Recommendations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Suggest suitable changes and/or solutions Action plan for recommendations if required 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do the recommendations suggest possible solutions and/or actions etc?
Glossary	List of terms e.g. for acronyms	
References or Bibliography	List of cited references	
Appendix	Attachments e.g. surveys, questionnaires	

Report Structure

Generic example

Your table of contents may vary depending on the type and function of your report.

	Page Numbers
Title page	
Executive summary	1
Table of contents	2
1. Introduction	3
1.1. Purpose of the report	etc.
1.2. Issues to be discussed and their significance	etc.
1.3. Research methods	
1.4. Limitations and assumptions	
2. Discussion	
2.1 Literature review	
2.1.1 Issue 1	
2.1.2 Issue 2	
2.1.3 Issue 3	
2.2 Method	
2.2.1 Procedures	
2.2.2 Sample size	
2.2.3 Selection criteria	
2.3 Discussion and analysis of data	
2.3.1 Issue 1	
2.3.2 Issue 2	
2.3.3 Issue 3	
2.3.4 Reliability and accuracy of data	
3. Conclusions	
4. Recommendations	
4.1 Recommendation 1	
4.2 Recommendation 2	
5. References/Bibliography	
6. Appendices	
7. Glossary	

Report checklist

- 1 •What is the purpose of this report and has it fulfilled that clearly?
- 2 •Does the report cover all the key points? Do you offer sufficient evidence to 'prove' your points?
- 3 •Did you analyse your evidence/data in enough depth?
- 4 •Does your conclusion follow logically from your arguments, and do your recommendations follow logically from your conclusions?
- 5 •Is the language, tone, style and pitch clear, direct and formal, suitable for the reader and the subject?
- 6 •Is the grammar, punctuation and spelling correct? Is the report the correct length?
- 7 •Is the layout simple, clear, logical and consistent, with conventional sections, headings, labels and numbers? Is the right material in the right sections?
- 8 •If illustrations such as figures and tables have been included, are they clear and purposeful, usefully integrated and properly referenced?
- 9 •Have you used an appropriate number and range of sources? Have all sources and references been acknowledged, in the main body and at the end in a list of references?
- 10 •Should there be a glossary? If there is one, is it comprehensive?
- 11 •Are the appendices clearly labelled? Is the reader directed to each appendix in the body of the report?
- 12 •Have you left the report on one side for a while before going back to review and edit it?

What reports should have and do		
<p>1 Title Page</p> <p>This should normally include the title, your name and the name of the tutor to whom it is being submitted, date of submission, your course/department, and if applicable, the name of the person and/or organisation who has commissioned the report. Avoid “fancy” fonts and effects.</p>	<p>5 Methodology</p> <p>Methodology deals with the methods and principles used during the research. Explain the method/s used for the research and why they were the appropriate ones. You may, for example, be doing mostly documentary research or you may have collected your own data. You should explain the methods of data collection, materials used, subjects interviewed, or places you visited. Give details of how/when you carried out your research and explain why you used the particular methods which you did use, rather than other methods. Also consider the ethical issues.</p>	<p>9 Recommendations</p> <p>Make your recommendations only if required. Include positive or negative suggestions for either action or further research.</p>
<p>2 Synopsis/Abstract/Executive Summary</p> <p>Most reports need an abstract, but they are generally more important for technical reports or scientific documents. An abstract:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • is a succinct passage which provides a brief outline on what was achieved/decided/concluded in your report. • is placed on a separate page before the contents page. • can be written last so that every bit of necessary detail is taken from the finished report. • is one part of a report that will certainly be read by a client/assessor/manager. The rest of the report is read if more detail is required. • is about half a page in length. Sometimes a word limit is given. This can range from 50-300 words. 	<p>6 Findings/Results from Research</p> <p>What did you find out? Clearly present your results. Show the essential data and calculations here. You may want to use tables, graphs and figures.</p>	<p>10 Bibliography</p> <p>List all sources referred to in the body of the report. These will be referenced in the body of the text using the Harvard method.</p>
<p>3 Contents Page</p> <p>Lists all major sections and page numbers.</p>	<p>7 Analysis and Discussion</p> <p>Interpret your findings. What do you make of them? How do they compare with those of others who have done research in this area? The accuracy of your measurements/results should be discussed and any research design deficiencies should be mentioned.</p>	<p>11 Appendices</p> <p>If you have used questionnaires, it is usual to include a blank copy in the appendix. Also include data and/or calculations, to which you have referred to in the main body of the report. There may be maps, drawings, photographs or plans that you want to include. If you have used special equipment, you may want to include information about it.</p>
<p>4 Introduction</p> <p>Set the scene; give some background information about the topic. State the aim/purpose of the investigation. Outline the sections in the body of the report. In more formal reports/dissertations this is supplemented by a literature review.</p>	<p>8 Conclusion</p> <p>A conclusion will demonstrate an understanding of the findings. It notes the shortcoming/pitfalls of the methodology and it will also make judgements.</p>	<p>12 Glossary</p> <p>A collection of unusual words in the report.</p>

The highlighted sections make up the **Main Body** of the report.

Organise these sections in a logical sequence: what you investigated, what you found, what interpretations and what judgements you made. Use short informative headings and subheadings.

Web resources



Learnhigher

<http://www.learnhigher.ac.uk/Students/Report-writing.html>



http://www2.napier.ac.uk/getready/writing_presenting/reports.html



<http://openlearn.open.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=3359>



http://www.ncsu.edu/labwrite/index_labwrite%2AD.htm



<http://www.lc.unsw.edu.au/onlib/labrep.html>

Mindmap

Adapted from: http://learnhigher.ac.uk/resources_for_students/Report-writing/Whats-it-all-about/Structure-of-a-report.html

