

Report Writing

This document focuses on the report writing process, and on report layout and presentation. Although this information is generally accepted business practice, you are advised to consult with your tutors regarding any specific expectations they have for this kind of work.

1 The process

1.1 Step 1 - identify the purpose of the report

Unless you are certain about the purpose of your report, it is unlikely that your conclusions and/or recommendations will be relevant. Therefore, it is important to clearly identify the purpose of the report. This can be achieved by writing a one-sentence statement about the problem, issue or question being posed. The report may be required to assist in decision-making, to solve a problem or perhaps to persuade the reader to adopt an idea or a particular approach. In any event, this activity requires reflective and analytical thinking.

Alternatively, it may be useful to write a concise title which clearly indicates the content and scope. If you take this approach, however, you should be careful that the title is impartial and does not reflect a bias toward a preferred outcome.

1.2 Step 2 - identify the readers and their needs

Generally speaking, the reader's knowledge of the subject will influence the type of background information and technical language you use in your report. However, since your readers are most likely to be your tutors and an 'imaginary reader', the principle is the same as that which applies to essay writing (see section 5.4).

This approach emphasises the importance of creating meaning for the reader by avoiding unnecessary explanations and focusing on clearly defined issues that help the reader understand the nature and direction of the report.

1.3 Step 3 - research the topic

In order to produce a high quality report, it is necessary to use relevant and current information from a variety of sources. Individuals who may have first-hand knowledge of the subject are a valuable source of information. However, secondary data contained in books and journal articles will form the bulk of the information for writing your report and it is worthwhile supplementing this with information contained in newspaper articles, theses, conference papers, speeches, annual reports, brochures, and so on. Besides being an efficient means of collecting data, reading a variety of materials may provide useful insights into the nature of the problem, acquaint you with terminology, theory or methods you had not previously considered, refer you to other sources of information and generally assist you in formulating a tentative outline.

Whilst depth and breadth of reading are highly recommended, for practical purposes you should also be selective in what you read. Ignore outdated and irrelevant materials and always keep the purpose of your report in mind.

It is also important to record your sources on some type of database either a computerised system or a simple alphabetic card index. Cite the author, date, title, publisher, city of

publication and page numbers. The database will assist you to prepare an accurate and complete reference list.

1.4 Step 4 - outline the report

Having reviewed, synthesised and interpreted the information, the next step is to prepare the body of your report. (Leave the introduction and conclusion until later.) This is done by establishing a framework or structure around which you will write. Start off by experimenting with four or five major headings as 'signposts' for your thinking. It is within these major sections that you will present the facts, explanations and reasoning that will lead to your conclusions and recommendations. This means that you place related issues into groupings according to common characteristics, taking into account the purpose of your report. Each section heading should clearly indicate its content, should have reader interest and be as brief as possible. You then need to arrange these groupings or headings into a logical sequence. The outlining process often requires a number of revisions, but once you are satisfied with it, you can work on developing the sub-sections under each heading.

1.5 Step 5 - write the draft

Once you have outlined the body of report, that is, arranged the major section headings and sub-headings, the next step is to prepare the first draft. Do not worry about spelling and punctuation at this stage. Instead, focus on the ideas you are presenting, the evidence to support them and their logical flow.

Try to form your own line of argument based on your research data. For every section, commence by writing a sentence which encapsulates your main idea or ideas, then elaborate with supporting evidence. This means that you are expressing the ideas in your own words and explaining to the reader how other writers' ideas have had an influence on your argument or how your argument has incorporated these ideas and why. If you find a quotation in your reading that makes a strong contribution to your argument, quote it and ensure that you reference the source of the quote. However, avoid over-quoting as the reader will soon lose sense of the argument.

Once this has been done, ensure that the information flows logically and that you have guided the reader's understanding by adding linking statements such as 'After considering..., it follows that ... is important'. In other words, you need to explain your line of thinking for the reader, highlighting the relevance and importance of the sections which lead to the conclusion and/or recommendations.

An important consideration in this drafting stage is impartiality. As a researcher and writer, you need to express your ideas in an objective manner. Consequently, it is general practice to write the report in third person, past tense. For example, instead of 'We did this study...' write 'The purpose of this study was to...'. Also remember to write clearly and concisely without contractions such as 'don't' or 'shouldn't' and, avoid slang.

1.6 Step 6 - edit the draft

Once you have completed a rough draft, you need to check that your ideas are clearly expressed and that your writing makes sense. If possible, you should leave the report for at least one day before editing. Edit it yourself or have someone else proofread the report, checking for inconsistency of argument, poor grammar, spelling, typographical errors, etc. An editing checklist has been included in this manual for your convenience (see section 6.3). Keep

in mind that you may have to prepare several drafts of your report, reading through, correcting and refining your ideas and expression with each one.

1.7 Step 7 - the finished product

Making your report as comprehensive and professional as possible plays an important role in communicating your ideas to your reader.

There are various ways of enhancing the visual appeal of your report. Firstly, choose a typeface that is easy to read. Most word processing software offers a variety of font choices. You can also enlarge the font for a title page or reduce it for notations. Use bullet points, italics or boldface for emphasis and use them consistently.

Format the report so that it is visually pleasing. Leave plenty of room in the side margins (particularly the left), and at the top and bottom of each page. Include illustrations, tables or graphs, but make certain that they have been adequately explained in the body of the report. Do not incorporate them unless they are relevant to the point you are making.

2 Report presentation and layout

In this section a number of guidelines regarding report presentation and layout are presented. These guidelines are not prescriptive and some academic staff may have their own preferences, so it is important that you consult the subject outline and/or the tutor before proceeding.

2.1 Structure of a report

Although the structure of a report can vary, business and academic reports usually (but not always) contain the following parts:

- Transmittal document (this document is an attachment to the report)
- Title page
- Table of contents
- List of figures
- List of tables or illustrations
- Executive summary/Summary and recommendations
- Introduction
- Body of the report (this section is further divided into as many sections as necessary)
- Conclusion(s)
- Recommendation(s)
- Appendices
- Bibliography/Reference list

2.2 Preliminaries

The preliminary sections of a report include the transmittal document, title page, table of contents, lists of figures, tables and illustrations and executive summary. The preliminary pages are numbered with small Roman numerals.

Transmittal document

A report often includes a covering letter or memo to the person who requested it. If the report is internal to the organisation, this document is a 'memo'. Essentially, the writer says, 'Please find attached the report you requested.' Additionally, the writer may mention items of special interest and acknowledge those who may have contributed to the report. This is optional and you are only required to submit this on request.

Title page

Unless otherwise stated the title page of your report should include the following details:

- title of the report
- your name and student number
- due date for the assignment
- name of the tutor or lecturer for whom the report was written
- the name of the subject (including the subject code)

Table of contents

This page(s) is used to outline the sections and sub-sections of the report. It reveals the organisation of the report showing the headings and sub-headings and their corresponding page numbers.

List of figures, tables, illustrations

When there are six or more figures, tables and illustrations, they are listed on a separate page with their corresponding page numbers in the text. If only a few exist, then they are included in the 'table of contents' page.

Executive summary/Summary and recommendations

Reports usually include a summary section which is called an 'executive summary' or 'summary and recommendations'. It provides an overview of the contents of the report. The executive summary summarises the aims and methods of the report (from the introduction) and the conclusions and recommendations reached (from the conclusion and recommendations sections). It is always written in your own words and contains no quotations. The 'executive summary' is placed at the beginning of the report, after the table of contents but before the introduction and it is given a Roman numeral rather than an Arabic number, as a page number.

In the executive summary you should do the following:

- accurately and precisely summarise the main contents of the report: include the theme or purpose, sources of information, main findings and very importantly, conclusions and recommendations
- avoid reporting on background material in any length. (This should be done in the Introduction.)
- avoid writing more than one page.

2.3 Introduction

The introduction of a report usually covers some or all of the following points:

- purpose or objective of writing the report
- background information (e.g. brief history, context of topic, organisation or problem)
- scope i.e. size or extent of study, amount of data collected, time frames, focus of data collection or discussion (e.g. department or whole organisation)

- methodology, i.e. the kind of data used (e.g. who was interviewed, what type of material was referred to). In certain reports, the methodology may be set out in a separate section prior to the body of the report
- assumptions and limitations, (e.g. given the above material, what assumptions did you make and what limitations does this place on the material that follows)
- plan, (e.g. what format does the report follow). This briefly overviews the argument, framework or logical structure that the reader should expect to read in the rest of the report.

2.4 Results/findings/discussion

This is a significant part of the body of your report and this section should contain the basic facts supported by examples, quotations, charts, diagrams etc. The organisation of the main body of the report will vary considerably according to such factors as the type of problem posed and nature of the topic and the length of the report. However, as a general rule, the findings are divided into logical sections and sub-sections with appropriate headings and sub-headings. These should be numbered using the decimal system.

2.5 Conclusion

Round off your work with a concluding section. There are logical deductions drawn from the findings in the previous section. Sum up the main points and refer to any underlying theme. If any questions or issues remain unresolved, mention them in the conclusion.

2.6 Recommendations

The recommendations comprise the suggested course of action to be taken to solve a particular problem. They are written as action statements without justification and they are stated in clear, specific language. They should be expressed in order of importance.

6.2.7 Supplements

Appendices

Include in an appendix any supporting evidence, such as tables, which is not possible to incorporate in the main body of the report. If original questionnaires or tests have been used they may be included in this section.

Bibliography/Reference list

The bibliography should give information about all sources consulted in writing the report. It is customary to arrange the bibliography in alphabetical order according to author. Sub-divisions may be used for texts and journals. Full publication details must be included.

3 Report writing checklist

Does the title page have:

- the title of the assignment
- the author's name
- the recipient
- the name of the course
- the name of the department/faculty
- the date of submission
- the approximate length?

Does the table of contents have:

- a list of tables
- a list of figures
- an abstract
- headings matched with Arabic page numbers
- references
- a Roman numeral
- a heading?

Does the list of tables have:

- a heading
- table numbers, titles matched with Arabic page numbers
- a Roman numeral?

Does the list of figures have:

- a heading
- figure numbers, titles matched with Arabic page numbers
- a Roman numeral?

Does the abstract have:

- a separate page
- a heading
- a summary of the main points in the assignment
- a Roman numeral?

The Text

Does the main text have:

- an introductory section
- developing sections
- a concluding section
- a reference list?

Does the introduction:

- define the topic and the key terms
- delineate the scope and focus of the topic
- indicate the writing task
- present a plan of the argument followed in the essay
- show the writer's theoretical stance/ approach?

Does the development:

- expand the plan of the essay given in the introduction
- keep to the topic
- carry out the writing task
- follow the theoretical approach proposed in the introduction
- back up claims with quotations?

Does the concluding section:

- restate the main ideas
- give the writer's personal opinion on the matter
- state any implications?

Layout

Do headings and subheadings:

- follow a consistent and accepted style?

Are short quotations:

- enclosed in quotation marks
- incorporated into the body of the paragraph
- less than three lines long
- sourced with the author's surname, date of publication and page number in brackets?

Are long quotations:

- longer than three lines
- single spaced
- indented for their entire length
- sourced with the author's surname, date of publication, page number?

Are all quotations:

- relevant
- copied verbatim
- sourced accurately?

Have all in-text paraphrases and citations been sourced by:

- author's name
- date of publication
- optional page numbers?

Are tables incorporated with:

- an in-text cross-reference
- a frame
- a number that is consecutive
- a heading?

Are figures incorporated with:

- an in-text cross-reference
- a frame
- a number that is consecutive
- a heading?

Are the references:

- on a separate page
- under the appropriate heading according to the Harvard and/or footnote system
- listed alphabetically by surnames?

Do books include:

- the author's surname and initials in that order
- the date of publication
- the title (underlined or in italics)
- the edition of the book
- the publisher
- the place of publication?

Do journal articles have:

- the author's surname and initials in that order
- the date of publication of the journal
- the title of the journal article in quotation marks
- the journal name (underlined or in italics)
- the volume number of the journal
- the part number of the journal, if applicable
- the page numbers of the article?

Do articles/papers in edited books have:

- the author's surname and initials in that order
- the date of publication of the book
- the title of the essay/paper/article in quotation marks
- the editor's initials and surname in that order
- the book title (underlined or in italics)
- the edition, if applicable
- the publisher
- the page numbers of the article?

(Original source of this document is unknown)