

Writing better reports

Here are some general tips for improving reports. Some simple checking and a little care can make a big difference to the reader's response. Look at professional reports to see what features distinguish them from clumsy 'rubbish'.

Formatting

Pay close attention to the layout and design of your pages and type. This creates the first impression on your reader and a professional appearance is always better. Clumsy, poorly formatted reports look careless and amateurish. The following issues deserve attention.

Always leave plenty of space under headers used at the top of pages¹ – they should not look like part of the body text. Sometimes a line or extra space (use the Enter key) in a header avoids confusion. Look at the header on the next page as an example – it is clearly not part of the page's body text.

Line spacing should be 1.5 or double-spaced. Reading is easier with more space and you want your reader to have an easy job.

Make sure you use an appropriate font. You are writing in English and foreign character fonts do not space the punctuation marks and special characters properly. This looks clumsy and amateurish.

Headings

Never have a heading at the bottom of a page. Force any of these to go to a new page before you print your work (Insert menu, Break, Page Break).

Always use **bold type** for headings and sub-headings, or *italics* for small minor headings.

Think about the hierarchy of your headings – the most important ones are usually larger, and sub-headings are smaller. Look at this page as an example of hierarchy and font sizes. No heading should be smaller than your body type.

¹ This refers to headers, not headings. They are different things. The text at the top of the next page, 'Tips for better reports' is a header. The word, 'Headings' on this page is a heading.

There should be slightly more space before a heading than after it – look at the headings on these pages.

Sections

Executive Summary, Introduction & References should each start on new pages. Other sections may be started on new pages, but it is essential with these important sections.

References need to start on a new page, be well-spaced and listed alphabetically (A-Z). It is not necessary to put an entire web address if you have the title & page name. If you are not sure which is the author's family name, ask somebody! (Peter 2004) looks very suspicious. (Smith 2004) does not.

Content

Purpose

The main purpose of a report is *to inform* about something in relation to the aim or central research question of the report – not to simply rewrite information that is already known (e.g. from a website.) The important aspects are *any logical connections, implications, conclusions* or *recommendations* that you may give. The information you get from other sources merely supports these.

Make sure you tell your reader your purpose.

Conclusion

Restate the main purpose of your report: *This Report has ... through/by...*

What did you find?

Graphics

Only use pictures, graphs & charts if you refer to them in the text. They are not decorations; they should be part of the information. Attach captions by using automatic captions (Insert: caption).

Language

Do not use personal language – *I, we, you* are best avoided. Use passive voice to avoid it. For example, *we wrote this report...* should be: *this report was written.*

Use a concordancer to make sure you are using common words properly: *benefit, benefits, beneficiary, beneficiaries, aims/aimed, knowledge, gain, support/supports, advantages, chances, opportunities*, etc. Look for other words you use a lot.

Check all **nouns** and make sure you are using them and ‘talking about’ them correctly: Are they countable/uncountable? Should they be singular/plural? Are they general or specific? Do they need articles? Which articles? What words and structures are they usually used with? (Concordancer).

Noun groups, complex nouns and organisation names need special attention – the last noun determines the grammar: *going to Myer*, vs. *going to **the** Myer Centre*, or ***the** Myer store on Rundle Mall*; *joining Red Cross* vs. *visiting **the** Red Cross office*

Check all **verbs** and make sure you are talking about them correctly: what time are they referring to? Use tenses and verb forms correctly.

Do not copy sentences directly from websites – plagiarism aside, it doesn’t integrate well with your own text. Also, you do not get feedback on your own writing skills if you are using the words of others.

Do not translate metaphors and expressions: *a coin has two sides, a double-edged sword*, etc.

Avoid **subjective** phrases: *as we all know...*, *...is the best in the world, to be honest....*, etc.

Avoid “IELTS” expressions: *firstly, secondly, thirdly* – only use these to list things, not for separate paragraphs; *on the one hand.... on the other hand; some people ...* too vague, which people?