

WRITING EFFECTIVE REPORTS AND ESSAYS

Writing Effective Reports

A. What are Reports?

Reports are documents which both **give** a reader **information** and ask the reader to **do something** with that information. Reports can be used:

- to suggest new ideas and options;
- to ask people to accept a point of view;
- to influence decisions;
- to ask people to make choices between alternative recommendations

Therefore a well structured and well written report can be a very influential document.

A report will usually follow a simple format which can be identified over and over again as you look through the reports written by academics, agencies or individuals. One of the key issues is to carefully provide signposts' for the reader throughout the report. Use headings, sub headings, bullet points (but remember to use full sentences rather than notes here) and new paragraphs for new topics.

The format may be influenced by the purpose and length of the report. There are nine identifiable sections in most reports, although a contents list and abstract are usually only used with a long report.

- 1 Title or title page
- 2 Contents list
- 3 Abstract
- 4 Introduction
- 5 Discussion
- 6 Conclusions
- 7 Summary
- 8 Recommendations
- 9 Appendices (and don't forget the reference list when writing an academic report)

B. The Format of a Report

1. Title or title page

It helps the reader to know what the report is about to have a title and sometimes a brief explanation of the purpose of the report. In a longer report you can have a short title and a long, more descriptive title. You should also identify the audience for the report, who has written it (the authors) and when it was written (the date).

2. Contents List

Used in long reports rather than short ones. A contents list helps the reader find their way around the report. Keep the chapter titles simple and clearly worded so you don't confuse the reader. Ensure the pages are numbered so it is easy to move straight to the relevant section.

3. Abstract

Normally only used in long and formal reports or if your work is being published. It is the whole report summarised in 80-200 words. It tells the reader what you examined and why; what you discovered; how you did it and what conclusions you were led to. It is really a file note for a reader to see if the whole document is worth reading. Sometimes you will be asked to provide an abstract and the key words which give the reader an idea of what

is covered/relevant. For example, the key words in a handout on report writing could be: reports; purpose; content; structuring; styles; learning; building an argument.....

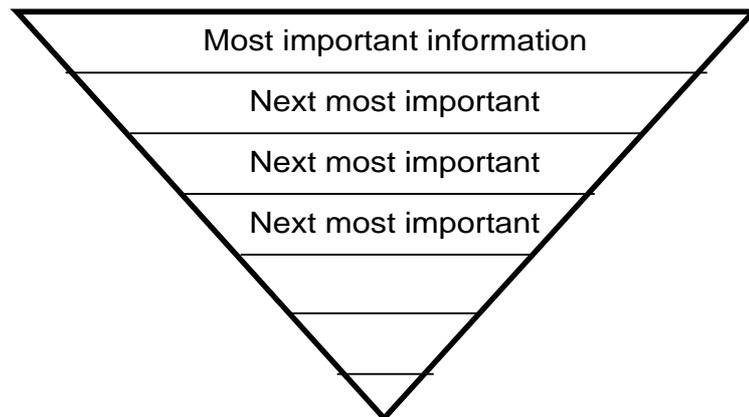
4. Introduction

Should be quite brief. It can be a paragraph or a whole chapter but it should tell the reader:

- The topic;
- Who commissioned (asked for) it and when;
- The reason for the report;
- The terms of reference and limitations;
- A brief outline of the background to the report;
- The method of working (if this is very detailed it might form one of the appendices);
- What sources have been used in researching the report (and again, if these are numerous the detail should be in the appendices and referenced);
- The key issues which will be addressed (another way of 'signposting').

5. Discussion

The main body of the report and the longest part. It goes into more detail about the subject. See Section C on 'building your argument'. It should be arranged logically in one or a series of chapters. You should use headings and sub-headings to help the reader find their way around it. Writing a report is not like writing a detective novel so you don't leave the best bits until last! The Plain English Campaign recommends the use of the 'inverted triangle' way of writing in reports.



This ensures that even if the reader only wants to read part of the report they will still have read the most important information. It might be worth mentioning here that staff will always read the whole report if it is an assignment!

6. Conclusions

These are the main findings from the research that went into the report:

- What you set out to find out – the purpose of the report
- What you found out;
- What was significant about what you discovered;
- How it answers the question set by the person who commissioned the report.

Conclusions arise logically from the work you have already done. You shouldn't present any new information here. Just use the information you have collected to inform the options, indicators, lessons or advice you wish to give the readers.

7. Summary

The key information from the report, often presented in bullet points or short paragraphs. It mainly summarises the high points – the findings and conclusions, rather than discussing what, when and how again. A summary can often be separated from and read instead of the whole report, so a brief introduction to the summary could be used. Summaries are often placed at the front of long reports in recognition that the long report will be too much for many busy readers to take in. You could liken a summary to the trailer for a film, tempting you to go along for the whole thing, even when you have been given a fair idea of the plot and outcomes!

8. Recommendations

When a report is being used to present options or make some recommendations for action you have to give the reader some clues about what these might be. Again, don't leave the preferred option or course of action until last. Use that 'inverted triangle' approach here too. So you should present your most favoured ideas, options or recommendations first. These are likely to be debated more thoroughly by the readers and they will ideally come to a more informed decision (the one you prefer!).

9. Appendices

You use the Appendix to 'dock' informative and helpful information here. You shouldn't use too many appendices – they should never overwhelm the report itself. If you have done some research, put the (blank) questionnaire or interview questions here. You can insert (short) documents from other sources (for example, a brief summary of another report which would be helpful to the reader). Tables, photographs, drawings or maps which will help the reader make sense of the report can be inserted into the appendices. Be selective and don't forget to provide the 'signpost' to the relevant appendix in the body of your report - put the relevant appendix you want the reader to look at in brackets, for example, (Appendix 1) or (see Appendix 1).

As you may well be writing your report as an assignment, you **must** reference all the sources you use in the body of the report and always have a reference list whenever you are asked to write a report at university. This is not always required in a report in the workplace, although crediting the sources you have used is a courtesy.

C. Building an Argument

Whenever you write, you will have to build and support an argument. What do we mean by this and how do you do it?

Let's look at a situation where you are asked to provide a report to answer a question in an assignment. The first stage in preparing to write is to look at the key words in the question/task/assignment brief – what is it asking you to do? For a brief explanation of key words and what they mean, see Section G.

Building an argument is like building a wall. You need a strong foundation (your preparation; your reading and research; your skills to question or interrogate the information to find out what is relevant for you) to hold up the wall. You need bricks (facts, arguments and discussions; contradictions and similarities) and you need the mortar to hold it together (logical structure, signposting; supporting evidence). These will lead you towards the goal of answering the question in an informed and well argued way.



Decide what information you need to include to fully answer the question. Use a 'mind map' or a list of topics so you can ensure you cover everything you want to cover and can plan a logical order for your writing.

For each area under discussion consider what reading you have done on the topic. Make notes and ask:

- Who said what about it?
- Where did they say it?
- What was the context in which they did this?
- How does it compare or contrast; support or challenge your thinking on the topic?

Use general texts on the issue; relevant and reliable web sites; source documents such as previous reports from the workplace (if possible); good practice guidance from professional bodies where relevant, journal articles from academic and trade press; newspaper cuttings, class handouts, etc. Use as wide a range as possible. Don't just keep to the class handouts. We don't want to see you repeat what we have told you, but to find out more for yourself. The classroom is the starting point, going back to our analogy of building the wall, it is a bit like digging the trench to hold the foundations.

Use the most up to date textbooks. Out of date or older books do have their uses to provide a historical context, but ensure that you know what the latest thinking or best practice is.

Don't fall into a common trap for students: looking at the topic and telling us all you have ever found out about it, in the hopes that something, somewhere in your report, might answer the question. You will run out of time, space (particularly if you are

given a word or page limit) and irritate or confuse the reader who doesn't instantly see the purpose or relevance of your answer.



Lets go back to that brick wall. If you just pile up bits of information eventually the pile will fall over. If you just tumble all the information you possess in no order into the report it will just be as if it is a pile of rubble. Either way it won't be 'fit for purpose' as your reader will become confused rather than enlightened.

So keep your writing focused on its purpose and carefully select what information is required to answer the question. This does require skill to judge what is required. Some of this comes from ensuring you read the whole brief and from checking those key words and look at the criteria by which the work will be marked (evaluated; judged). If still in doubt, clarify what is required with your tutor (or any other person asking for the report).

You will need to use references to let the reader know where they can find what you have read and researched. Remember that no more than 10% of your work should be directly quoted from someone else's work. Always, always, ALWAYS reference where you found the work, and for the direct quotations, add a page number. Keep a note of all your sources using the Harvard system (you will be given a Referencing Guide or can find assistance in referencing in the university library). Make sure you note down the page numbers for any quotable quotes you might use. If using web-based resources make a note of the URL

Why do we ask you to do all this? So we can see where your ideas originate and how you have researched and used the materials. We don't want you to solely use the ideas of others, as we will want to see how creative you can be with your thinking. However, we will want to see where the ideas which inform your thinking come from.

If you want to give examples or case studies, show how they relate to the topic question. Tell your reader why they should bother to read the case study or example and make a link back to the question.

In order to give your report (that brick wall) strength you need to link topic areas and see where there are overlaps between the ideas of others and your own points of view. Look for gaps between what is said and your experiences. Debate why the gaps might be there. Consider how the information you have found and any similarities or differences affect your answer to the question.

Check the question or task again:

- Have you answered the question?
- Have you completed all the elements in the brief?
- Have you discovered an answer which supports the argument or contradicts or challenges it?
- Have you supported your assertions from your reading and wider research?

If you have answered all these questions you will have 'built your argument'.

E. The Order of Writing

If you don't have a title for the report already (sometimes you will be given the title in an assignment briefing) devise a working title, which can be modified or changed later, but which gives you a focus for the report.

A suggested way of working is to make some notes about your purpose and approach. This will form the basis of your introduction. Write the discussion next and then consider the conclusions. Check that every conclusion you draw has been raised and debated in the body of the report. From these you should be able to come up with any recommendations.

Don't forget to keep a note of any references you use as you go along. It can be helpful to set up a new file or new page and every time you use a reference, insert the full reference in alphabetical order by author as you go along.

Write your formal introduction, your summary and title page. Number the document and (if required) prepare the contents page. If required you might also produce your abstract.

F. Writing a Brief or Briefing Paper

A brief or briefing paper is a **short report** used to inform someone you are asking to prepare something on your behalf. It doesn't follow quite the same format as a report but some of the principles are the same. It could be a development brief, asking a developer or architect or builder to plan what would be produced on a given site or a research brief asking a team of researchers to find out something for you or asking a consultant to present a scoping document (a review and forecast with implications/impact assessment) or asking a financial adviser to prepare some models of interest rate changes, etc. You might want consultants to compete to provide a service. You might ask for a range of options to inform decision-making. What the brief should do is **provide the guidance** for those who must complete it to produce the work you want, when you want it and in an accessible format.

- **What goes into the brief?**

You will have an introduction to the topic and set out your aims for what is to be developed or researched or provided.

You will set the parameters (boundaries). These could include timescales, budget, access to site, personnel, client groups, maps, other considerations. For example:

- On a development brief you may want:
Proposals for density, car parking, play, traffic, access, environmental factors, energy efficiency, etc.)
- On a research brief you may want:
Specific client groups/areas/property types targeted, balance or mix of methods, range of other organisations benchmarked
- On a consultants brief in a competitive environment you may want:
What kind of presentation you want, how long, when it will be judged, who will judge it, the criteria by which it will be judged, when you would want the work completed, an idea about budgetary constraints (maximums?)

You will advise on the reporting timescale and destination of the report (committee, Board, Chief Executive, tenants, etc). You might say something about the format (including design criteria such as binding, font sizes, use of maps, charts and diagrams, conclusions and summaries, types of recommendations). You might advise about how the report should be delivered (courier, mail, email) and where it should be delivered.

The clearer you are about what you want to find out and articulate this in the brief, the clearer will be the resulting report from whoever prepares it and the easier it will be to make informed decisions.

