

Tips on Writing Reports

A written report is not the same as an essay, but you do have to prepare by asking yourself the same general questions:

- Who is it for?
- What is my aim?
- How should the content be structured?
- Which style is appropriate?

Who is it for?

Reports generally have a specific purpose – they present information that contributes to decisions being made. Consider:

- Who is the audience and what is their background?
Are they experts in your field or will they need more careful explanation? Many steering committees and panels comprise a mix of professionals who won't recognise acronyms, or know what 'usual procedures' are, for instance.
- What do they need to know?
A report is a formal presentation of information/data and the analysis of that data. If background has been reported elsewhere you can keep this section to a minimum (report structure is important here). Reports produced for academic assessment items must address the specified task(s).
- How will they use the report?
Is it for filing or for decision making? Will they be passing it on for others to read? (confidentiality issues). If it is for an academic assessment item, does it demonstrate that you have gathered the information/data and analysed it in a way that incorporates your learning from the unit being studied?

What is my aim?

Hold this clearly in mind. Address the reporting requirements in the terms of reference (these are the assignment details, or contracting requirements). In addition, make your purpose clear, for instance:

- Are you primarily documenting activity?
- Is your methodology an important feature?
- Are 'recommendations' the significant output for decision and action?
- Do you intend to influence change? (Note that this may be your implied purpose, in which case you might not actually state this, but will need to organise your evidence to back up recommendations.)

Content and Structure

A report needs a clear structure; appropriate headings and sub-headings are essential so that your audience can find their way around important information. Always read assignment requirements (or other information you have been given). There may be a template for you to follow or suggested heading structure.

A general heading structure to follow:

- **Title**, author, affiliation, contact details (email and/or phone number) and date: all on the cover page.
- **Contents**, which lists all sections and specifies Appendices which are included.
- **Executive summary** (see note below)*
- **Introduction**, including brief background, terms of reference etc.
- [Main body]: Headings here might vary according to report purpose, and could include
 - Methodology, Results, Discussion for a technical report or analysis
 - Performance against Objectives/Outcomes/Schedule/Budget, for a project report.
- **Conclusion**, which draws from the above but should not include new information.
- **Recommendations**, which arise from your conclusions; at minimum this should include the recommendation that the authorising committee accept the report and approve/consider its recommendations, or approve continuation of the project, etc.
- **References**, if you have included any. A report doesn't usually include a review of the literature, but if you have applied someone else's methodology or used evidence to back up your conclusions etc., then you should provide appropriate references.
- **Appendices** should be included where necessary to provide ancillary graphics and tables, survey instruments that have been used, etc. Number each Appendix and specify them in the Contents.

If possible, include the whole Report as one electronic document so that the receiver only has to print out one item. If it is really necessary (because of format difficulties) to provide Appendices separately, then this fact must be noted in the covering Contents list.

*An **executive summary** is a short section that summarizes a longer report, proposal or group of related reports in such a way that readers can rapidly review a large body of material without having to read it all. It is intended as an aid to decision making by busy managers. Plan to create a summary each time you write a report exceeding four pages. Write the summary after you write the main report, and keep it short.

- List the main points the summary will cover in the same order they appear in the main report.
- Write a simple declarative sentence for each of the main points.
- Add supporting or explanatory sentences as needed, avoiding unnecessary technical material and jargon.
- Read the summary slowly and critically, making sure it conveys your purpose, message and key recommendations. You want readers to be able to skim the summary without missing the point of the main report¹

¹ eHow website: http://www.ehow.com/how_16566_write-executive-summary.html

(An executive summary is different from an *abstract*, which will usually be shorter and should rather provide a neutral overview rather than being a condensed version of the full document.)

Style

A Report is a presentation of facts and employs a formal style. Information should be provided clearly, using short concise paragraphs, dot or numbered points where appropriate.

Writing style should be in the third person and not become chatty, for instance:

The project encountered some problems due to occasional unavailability of essential contributors through sickness, and this resulted in the schedule having to be extended.

rather than:

Other NUMs called in sick, which caused the schedule to blow out when I couldn't get the information I needed.

Presentation is important, so:

- Make it easy to read by sensible use of white space
- Use appropriate headings and sub-headings
- Number graphics and tables
- Be consistent with your formatting (same font, consistent heading style, etc.)
- Number each page.

Practice your use of the word processing software. Poorly formatted tables are a major presentation hiccup and distraction for the reader.

Finally ...

Do:

- Proof read carefully
- Check you have included all sections and appendices you meant to
- Make sure your conclusions and recommendations are supported by the data and your interpretation of this data
- Double check your references and overall presentation.

Don't:

- Include inaccurate data or irrelevant information.

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[For a comprehensive link to more information on writing styles for different purposes try the University of Wollongong's Uni Learning pages at <http://unilearning.uow.edu.au/main.html>]