

Report Writing

Nothing succeeds like reports of success.

—SUE SANDERS

IMPORTANCE

You write reports for different purposes. You must have come across various types of reports. The teacher takes the attendance everyday in the classroom, the nurse writes the report after investigation of the patient's disease is done; a journalist after witnessing the untoward activity writes a column in the newspaper, a child gets his report card which conveys his progress, etc. These are all examples of reports of different nature. As a student also you must have been bothered with more serious forms of reports that require proper investigation, thorough assimilation of data and logical ordering of information. These reports fall under the category of technical reports. Once you join an organization, you will be required to write reports of all sorts. Sometimes you have to write about the progress of a project, occasionally about the assessment of some of your employees, and at times about the implementation of a new policy or procedure.

When you work whole-heartedly on a project, you have the sole authority and

right over it. No one has the right to interfere with your work. But when you make a report of your work, it passes from one desk to another. Your report communicates the results and accumulates the knowledge through the findings and conclusions. You may have received plaudits for getting your research published in journals but the preparation of good research report is not a trivial task. However good work you may have done, if the presentation is not coherent, then it mars the effectiveness of the report completely. You have to put your best efforts to communicate the information clearly and completely. Lee Iacocca, former President of Chrysler Corporation has said, "You can have brilliant ideas, but if you can't get them across, your brains will not get you anywhere".

The word 'report' comes from the Latin word *reportare* which is combination of *re* and *portare*. It means to carry back the information to someone who was not present at the scene of the event. Like the teacher takes the attendance record to show it to the superior or nurse maintains the record in the form of prescription and test results to show it to the doctor. These reports are of great utility at the time of requirement as they are systematic, and have the information and facts without distortion. Reports are important tools of decision-making. Therefore, they should be written very objectively so that right decisions are made. Reports usually flow upwards as are asked by the controlling officer or the superior. Remember, before you write a report the terms of reference are to be defined. The 'terms of reference' provide the writer the guidelines to cover certain identified topics, to investigate a particular product, say, or an event or proposal. The terms of reference dictate what kind of report you have to write. The objective and the extent of coverage are clearly delineated. No report is written without authorization, i.e. it is always asked for.

At times you feel whatever is communicated or described is a report. Can we then call every description a report? Even literary pieces, such as a play, a poem or a novel, can then be called reports. It is time we must understand the term 'report' clearly. To clarify the difference between technical report and literary work, you should know the distinction between the two. See Table 7.1.

Table 7.1 Difference between Technical Report and Literary Writing

Technical reports	Literary writings
Written on request	Written on own initiative
Audience identified	Audience not assured
Fixed structure	No fixed structure
Language: simple, precise, concise	Use of rhetorical language
Objective in approach	Subjective in approach
No aesthetic pleasure	Aesthetic pleasure derived
Matter of facts	Heightening of feelings
Written for a specific purpose	Not written for any specific purpose always

Definition

A report is a technical document which is result of thorough investigation, written for specific audience in a well-defined format, language easy-to-understand, it interprets and analyses the data and derives conclusion and recommendations, if asked.

A report is an outcome of a problem which needs to be addressed. You never write a report because you felt like writing one. A report covers all that is needed to be covered of a problem, nothing more and nothing less. That is why it is said that a report presents the facts in an economical way. That is the economy of words.

Objective

The primary purpose of a report is to present facts in an organized, ready-to-use form so that the decision can be made based on it. It offers solution to different business problems. However, the broad objectives of the report are to:

- Update the progress of a company's plans and activities.

- Produce the results in written form which could be used for future reference.
- Guide the organization for the corrective path for action.
- Record the work done.
- Disseminate the information and new ideas.
- Avoid repetition of the work done.
- Provide platform for cross-fertilization of ideas.
- Enhance the decision-making process.
- Check the validity of the information.
- Evaluate and compare the efficiency of new machinery, product or services.
- Assess the progress of any project.
- Record findings and recommend action.

Features

1. A report is written not to impress but to express, and its importance has nothing to do with its bulk.
2. The language in which it is written is clear, straightforward, simple English. Rhetorical language has no place here.
3. The objective of the report should be borne in mind while writing one so that your analysis, conclusions and recommendation can be oriented towards the basic purpose of the report.
4. The report must present the data as objectively as possible, without any distortion. The facts presented should be audience oriented. Twisting of facts may lead to wrong decision-making.
5. The report should be highly relevant apart from being precise. Unnecessary details cloud the relevant information, and, therefore, should be avoided. Let the report be sans frills.

6. The success of the report lies in clarity and brevity. A report must be systematic and well-organized. The purpose and objective should be clearly defined, the sources of collection of data mentioned, and recommendation properly limned. The report must have proper division and subdivision. Equivocal sentences misguide the readers, and so they must be avoided completely. Above all, the language should be grammatically correct.
7. The report should be structured such that it has title page, table of contents, introduction, discussion, conclusions, recommendation, bibliography, etc. Minor changes may appear in the structure according to the requirement of the organization.
8. To make the report more effective, proper use of illustration must substantiate the discussion which includes tables, figures, graphs, photographs, charts, maps.
9. There must be unity in the text. One idea should be dealt with in a paragraph, and sentences should be properly connected using appropriate cohesive markers.
10. The report should be neatly bound and documented for further reference. The report number and letter of transmittal help a lot in locating a particular report.

TYPES OF REPORT

Reports are classified based on the degree of formality, length, frequency of appearance and design. A formal report follows the well-defined format and subscribes to the same for better communication. However, informal and short report format is flexible and can be changed according to need.

The broad categories on the basis of which report can be classified are:

- Short reports and long reports (length)
- Management reports and technical reports (purpose)
- Routine reports and special reports (frequency)
- Oral report and written reports (mode)

Short Reports

Short reports are helpful when the problem is well-defined and the scope is limited. Their length varies from five to eight pages. Since they are not elaborate, they may contain only a few elements, such as note on authorization, problems dealt with, conclusions and findings to support. It is sans section and subsection headings.

These reports are in the form of 'Letter Report' and 'Memo Report'. The letter report follows the format of business letters and the most popular these days is the complete block form. In this format, the matter is aligned to the left margin, and the matter till salutation is devoid of punctuation marks. Also the complimentary close doesn't have punctuation marks. The tone is very similar to that of letters and personal style is appreciated. The use of active voice helps the writer to be more direct and economical. Memo report is another

variety, which is used to send the information within the organization. It is more informal than the letter report because of its limited circulation.

Every organization prescribes their format but, in general, they have 'To', 'From', 'Subject' format. It is sans salutations and complimentary close. A few suggestions given as follows may help you in writing effective short reports.

- Broach the report by telling the purpose of writing.
- If the memo is an answer to a query, a notification, reprimand, information that should be limpidly told to the reader by raising a point and then answering the same. If needed, follow it up.
- Write in expository style with conciseness, plainness and directness.

- Review the report written before dispatching it.
- Include the matter, which obstructs the flow of the report in the appendix.

Long Reports

Long reports are classified into two broad categories: *technical report* and *management report*. This classification is according to the audience for whom the reports are written. Technical report is written for specialized audience of researchers while management report is written for non-technical audience comprising managers or clients. It is a difficult task to write one report which can cater to both the audiences. Therefore, it is judicious to write reports specific to the audience concerned. The receivers of these reports have different background, training, and objectives.

Technical report

This kind of report includes full documentation and discussion in detail. All the sources, which were prime sources of documentation right from the inception of the report are included. The researchers need to refer to each minuscule detail, as the audience is interested to know what was done and how it was done.

The primary focus, though, is to complete the job but all the relevant materials required to replicate the study should be included. In contrast, one should discard the non-essential materials as in the labyrinth of details, the important materials get sidelined. The report should include sources of data collection, research procedures, sampling design, and data gathering instruments in addition to data analysis methods. The information, which breaks the flow of reading, should be included in the appendix.

The technical report should include the data analysis and the discussion elaborately. These should be divided into proper sections and subsections. Conclusions should follow the findings and recommendation should delineate the

future course of action to those interested to pursue the same study. Abstain from the use of jargons and registers. But if they are necessary, explain the same in the footnote or glossary. Don't be stringent in giving references of other similar researches, theories and procedures. Even if the reader is familiar with some of the researches and theories, explain them again in footnotes.

Management Report

When the client is more interested in results than methodology, communication then takes place with the help of management report. Sometimes a management report is followed by a technical report. Since a management report is for non-technical audience and the readers have more interest in the finer points like the main findings, the important paragraphs should come first followed by less priority paragraphs. Just after the prefatory and introductory part, the conclusions and recommendations are presented. If the readers wish to read the findings, they may read further on. Management report should make liberal use of illustrations so that verbal part can be curtailed which will save time of the reader. Report of this form is written for an individual and therefore, can cater to the specific demand of that person.

The style of the report should make unctuous reading and lead to quick comprehension of the major findings. The tone of the report is journalistic but accurate. Underline the headlines to draw immediate attention. Sentences and paragraphs should have clarity. Liberal use of white space and margins helps in easy reading. Put one finding in one page with a graphic image to support it.

Routine Report

Routine report is written regularly in a set format. Most of the people in an organization receive reports at fixed intervals, such as daily, fortnightly, monthly or yearly. The report can be on matters related to production, labour, efficiency, sales performance or the inventory record. There is not much use of language in this type

of report. The format is decided beforehand and the respondent has to put a tick mark against certain items mentioned in the pro forma. Sometimes, remarks are required to be written but should not be very long. The routine report includes progress report, inspection report, confidential report, laboratory report. Some of the routine reports may also include recommendation but not all. Routine reports written at regular interval of time are called periodic reports.

Special Report

The management depends a great deal on special report for vital decisions. Of course, this report, unlike, routine report doesn't have a standard format. This report is written on the request of the management on the spur of the moment. It is specified who has to report and to whom. Objectives, too, are clearly mentioned. This report is written when some aberrations are observed in routine matters. For example, cleaning of the complex was not found satisfactory despite hiring of four more employees for the job.

The report writer is clearly given the objectives while collecting the required data and deciding the procedures. The time limit is maintained and is vital. The report writer need not go beyond the demarcated objectives set by the management.

The writer of such report ought to be diligent, shrewd and judgemental. He should be efficient and must have a capacity to interpret the data effectively. Based on the interpretation, he should be able to suggest measures for controlling the problem. The language must be appropriate and grammatically correct.

Oral Report

When researchers present their findings orally, these presentations are called briefings. They are different from public speaking as they are meant for a small group. The presentation is mainly focused on statistics, as the audience is interested to hear the critical elements only. The presentation timing is usually for 20 minutes.

and rarely runs for an hour. There is also a session of questions and discussion after the end of the presentation for further clarification.

Preparation

Even when the report is bulky, it requires to be put across the audience succinctly. Remember a normal speed should be maintained while speaking, i.e. 120 to 150 words per minute. Therefore, at this rate in 20 minutes you have to communicate the information effectively. For this you require careful planning. Ask yourself questions, such as How long should you talk? If you get more than the planned time, what more will you communicate? Identify what is the purpose of the presentation? Is it to add to the knowledge of the audience? Is it to uncover obfuscating problem? Is it that you have to give the audience conclusions and recommendation for decision-making? By answering these questions, you will arrive at the objectives of the report. Then it is time to work out on the detailed outline. Your outline should contain the following elements:

- **Opening:** This is the most important part of the presentation, therefore the report should start with an attention catching statement. Devote 10% of the total time for the opening statement. It should be direct, catchy and introduce the nature of the discussion that follows. Explain the nature of the project, how it began and what do you attempt to do.
- **Findings:** These and conclusions come immediately after the opening remarks and each conclusion is strengthened by the findings.
- **Recommendations:** The third stage is to present recommendations; each recommendation may be followed by reference to the conclusion from which it is drawn. It is the onus on the presenter to invite questions from the audience.

When you are in your planning stage, you have to decide what type of audio-

visual aids you are going to use since you have to coordinate your presentation with the aid. If you are planning for power point presentation, do have a backup of your slides. Do practise rigorously but along with the audio-visual aids. If you have practised well using the aids, your presentation will take place with facile ease.

In Chapter 12, we will discuss the types of presentation. Know about all the four types of presentation and decide which one you are going to adopt. Impromptu presentation is ruled out as it is done without prior preparation. Will the report be memorized, read from the manuscript or given extemporaneously? Memorization will take lot of effort and a slight mistake can turn your presentation into a fiasco. The presentation will sound stilted and unnatural since it precludes establishing rapport with the audience. The speaker is more self-centred than audience-centred. Therefore, this mode of presentation is not adopted generally. Reading from the manuscript also has disadvantages, as there is no eye contact with the audience. As a result, the delivery sounds droning and lifeless. The head down posture is completely ruled out in management presentation. The extempore presentation is audience-centred and you rely minimal on notes. You will be more natural, conversational and flexible. While preparing for the presentation, have the complete draft along with the main points noted in cards. As all the points remain fixed in your mind, therefore you can elaborate when you refer to the cards. These cards should be of 5 by 8 inches and numbered serially. The final stage of preparation is rehearsal, a prerequisite of effective briefing. Work hard on the problematic areas, specially the parts that are awkwardly developed. There should be full-scale practice under simulate presentation condition. A videotape recorder is one of the best diagnostic tools.

Delivery

The way you present the report is as important as what you present. A well-structured presentation puts the audience in receptive mood. The audience is highly interested in the presentation and that is why they have assembled. A word of caution

is added here, you have to give presentation for information dissemination and not for entertainment. Demeanour, posture, dress and overall appearance should be apposite for the occasion. Control your volume, voice pitch, tone quality and inflection for proper communication. Since you have limited time, you have to get hold of audience without anecdotes and other rapport building techniques.

Audio-visual aids

Though you have variety of aids available but choose the best appropriate for the occasion. The help of audio-visual aids makes your presentation task quite easy. The following are the aids, which help you for better presentation:

- Chalkboards and whiteboards
- Handout material
- Flipcharts
- Overhead transparencies
- Slides
- Power point program

The choice of these aids will depend on the size of the audience and the time constraints. Do clarify before making the presentation. Remember that audio-visual aids should complement your presentation, and not dominate it. If there is some kind of failure, review quickly what you had said and continue with the rest of the presentation confidently.

Written Report

Written report is permanent record, therefore we need to be more careful while writing it. It can be referred to at any point of time, and is more authentic. This report requires more time from the writer's side, however, the reader can quickly glance through the complete report. The writer should possess good writing skills

along with comprehending abilities.

PRELIMINARY STRATEGIES

Before you undertake the herculean task of writing the report, various steps called preliminary strategies need to be identified. If these steps are followed effectively, then it is most likely that you will be able to produce a good report. A lot of time should be spent mulling over the minuscule details, such as collecting data, coherently relating them and the extent of coverage. Report planning is one of the most important stages of report writing. If this stage is seriously taken care of, it is rare a chance that your report will have errors in it. You must identify these following five steps clearly:

- Identifying the purpose and scope
- Knowing your audience
- Choosing the right methods and sources of data collection
- Organizing the data
- Highlighting the outline