

# Centre for English Teaching Specialization

## MOOC 4: Communication Skills for University Success

### 3.4d Professional report structures

While professional reports share a similar overall purpose to prepare students for writing in their profession, they can vary considerably in structure. This is mostly due to the variety in writing in the professions themselves; for example, environmental science students may be called upon to write environmental impact assessments, education students may write reports on hypothetical school situations, and business students may be asked to write proposals to companies. Despite the great variety in professional reports at university, a number of common forms have been identified by scholars of academic communication. Hilary Nesi and Sheena Gardner, who built a database of over 2000 pieces of high-scoring student pieces of writing, have identified in their collection several forms of common professional report. Other writers, such as Brick, Herke and Wong (2016), Candlin, Bhatia and Jensen (2002), and Nathan (2010) have also identified common professional report structures and their features. It is their work which we will be drawing upon in this short account.

A word of warning, however – these structures have been abstracted and generalised from situations that may differ from your own particular rhetorical situation. They are listed here to give you further ideas as to how professional reports may be structured in different academic fields, but are not here to be copied without thinking. Always analyse your particular rhetorical situation, and then adapt these structures as appropriate.

#### **Problem-Solution reports**

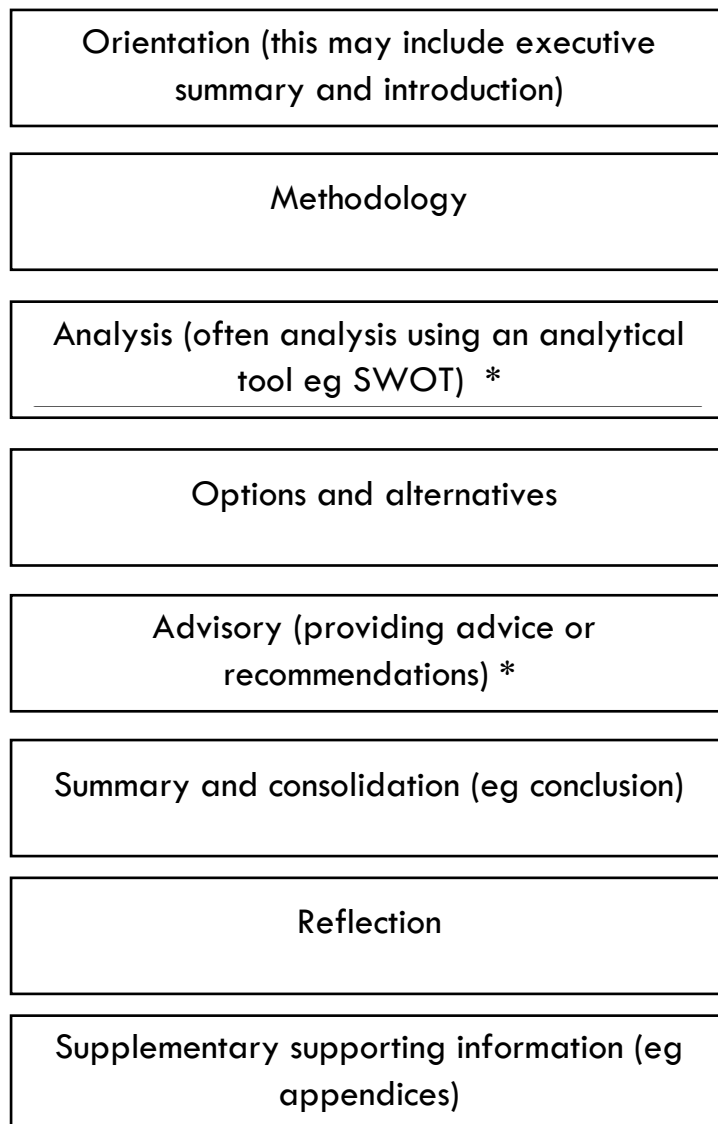
**(also known as Proposals or Business Case Studies)**

In many ways these types of reports are what are considered a ‘typical’ report, and students in a number of different disciplines will write them. They are reports written for professional contexts where a problem to a solution is proposed. Before writing these, the writer must determine if they are referring to a solution that has already been implemented, or if they are proposing a solution (as in Proposals). They will also need to ascertain whether just one solution needs to be proposed or covered, or several. These differences, along with difference in the academic field in which they are produced, make it difficult to give a definitive structure for these. Nathan (2010), in his analysis of business case study reports, identified the following stages, some of which are obligatory and some of which are option. Obligatory stages are marked with asterisk.

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As Brick, Herke and Wong (2016) point out, these forms of report also often have features such as a table of contents and title pages too.

#### Design Specification

These are often specific to disciplines such as I.T. and Engineering, and in many ways are similar to problem-solution texts in that they outline how certain software and hardware systems were designed and tested to meet client's specifications. Their main purpose is to demonstrate the writer's design skills, and are written with a client or user in mind as the imagined user. Unlike problem-solutions texts, however, the structure may be determined by guidelines issued by professional associations.

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According to Nesi and Gardner, Design Specifications contain three main parts, although these are often broken down into smaller categories. The three parts are:

- an introduction stating the purpose of the report, and the design specifications for the project;
- a main body where the model designed for the specifications, and the calculations or tests undertaken on the model;
- and a conclusion saying if the specifications were met or not.

As with most professional reports at university, there may be more frequent references to research in the early stages of the report, and a reference list at the end.

#### Problem questions

These have already been addressed in lesson 3.4b but will be again briefly outlined here. Problem questions are found in legal academic fields, and the purpose is for the student to demonstrate legalistic thinking and argument. These reports generally follow the IRAC model (Candlin, Bhatia and Jensen, 2002; Nesi and Gardner, 2012) as identified in the lesson.

Issue (the facts of the problem and other salient information)

Rule (the point(s) of law that apply in this case)

Application (how the law applies to the client and opposition)

Conclusion (whether the case is likely to succeed)

#### Medical case studies

Medical case studies focus on the identification of patients' conditions and illnesses, solutions offered and evaluations of the solutions. The structure of these can vary somewhat depending

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on the point at which the student is with their studies. Early in student's studies these may take the form of continuous text, and are often written with the patients' point of view in mind. Later case studies, often written during medical internships, are written more for fellow practitioners and can be terser in style. These later case study reports often list in separate sections such things as the patient's particulars, their medical history, examination results, formulation of the problem, management of the problem, outcomes and evaluation of outcomes. This format may be decided with reference to medical journal templates and pre-existing institutional models

#### Reference list

Brick, J., Herke, M., & Wong, D. (2016). *Academic culture: A student's guide to studying at university* (3rd ed.). South Yarra, Australia: Palgrave Macmillan.

Candlin, C. N., Bhatia, V. K., & Jensen, C. H. (2002). Developing legal writing materials for English second language learners: Problems and perspectives. *English for Specific Purposes*, 21(4), 299-320.

Nathan, P. (2013). Academic writing in the business school: The genre of the business case report. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 12(1), 57-68.

Nesi, H. & Gardner, S. (2012). *Genre across the disciplines*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.