

## **UNIT 8**

### **REPORT WRITING SKILLS**

#### **LEARNING OUTCOMES**

Upon the completion of this unit, the student should be able to:

- ✓ Explain what a report is;
- ✓ Identify the differences among the various types of reports;
- ✓ Conduct research and arrange the information logically;
- ✓ Use the suitable layout of a formal report;
- ✓ Write a formal report clearly and accurately based on research findings, using the correct format.

#### **8.1 Definition of report**

A document that investigates a specific subject according to a prescribed format and for a clearly defined readership- generally those in superior positions within a company or organization.

##### **8.1.1 Purpose of reports**

- ✓ Collect and present information needed by people in positions of authority.
- ✓ Facilitate the tasks of managers to take decisions and make policies for their organizations.
- ✓ Help in decision making
- ✓ Analyze statistics and data
- ✓ Record facts and provide a permanent record

#### **8.2 REQUIREMENTS FOR EFFECTIVE REPORT WRITING**

##### **1. Correct layout**

The report must be presented in a prescribed format

## **2. Objective reporting**

Use non-emotive language when writing a report

## **3. Accuracy**

The report should contain accurate facts and statements

## **4. Concise and clear writing**

Report on relevant information, leave out unnecessary data

## **5. Language use**

Simple and straightforward English, no slang, no jargon and keep the language formal.

## **6. Tenses**

Use a variety of tenses

## **7. Brevity**

A report should be written in short sentences – avoid unnecessarily long sentences.  
No paragraphs

## **8. Objectivity of recommendations**

The recommendations should be realistic and non-emotive

### 8.3 LANGUAGE APPROPRIATE FOR REPORTS

- ✓ Reports are written in a formal register/language
- ✓ They should be objective and impersonal
- ✓ Tone should be neutral
- ✓ Accuracy in grammar, punctuation and syntax
- ✓ Conciseness in writing while including all the relevant information
- ✓ Clarity of information presented
- ✓ Avoid impressing readers with long words or technical jargon.

### 8.4 DIFFERENT TYPES OF REPORTS

Depending on the purpose of the report, reports can be classified as routine, informative or evaluative.

**1. Routine reports** are prepared and submitted periodically as requested by the organisation and they include:

- ✓ Safety reports
- ✓ Accident reports
- ✓ Sales reports
- ✓ Progress reports
- ✓ Work reports

**2. Informative reports** set out to inform, so they provide facts of a situation. Examples include:

- ✓ Scientific research reports
- ✓ Technical reports
- ✓ Progress reports and
- ✓ Theses and Dissertations

**3. Evaluative reports** go beyond providing information. They analyse and evaluate the material to provide recommendations for action. Examples include:

- ✓ Investigative reports and
- ✓ Feasibility reports.

## **8.5 STEPS IN WRITING A REPORT**

- ✓ Determine the scope of the report
- ✓ Consider the audience
- ✓ Collect data
- ✓ Analyse data
- ✓ Determine the solution
- ✓ Organize the report

### **ACTIVITY 1:**

1. A report should be based on.....
2. It should be written in....
3. The style and tone of the report should be....
4. A report should consist of .....
5. A report should be written for....

## **8.6 THE REPORT WRITING-WRITING PROCESS**

There are four main stages in the report-writing process:

### **8.6.1 STAGE 1: PRE-WRITING REQUIREMENTS**

#### **Clarifying instructions**

It is important to establish what your report is expected to cover. If you take a guess at what is required, you might put a great deal of effort into investigating the wrong issue. Therefore, it is vital to make sure that you understand the requirements of the task before committing yourself.

### **Identifying your audience**

Because a wide variety of people usually read reports and because they are often used for making decisions, reports should be prepared for mixed audiences whose needs may differ. Some readers may need detailed technical information, whereas others will need only the conclusions and recommendations. Therefore, as the writer of the report, you should be able to select relevant information and to set it out in clearly defined sections for your audiences.

The various audiences who will read your report are:

- ✓ The primary audience
- ✓ The secondary audience
- ✓ The tertiary audience

Failing to target your report to your readers can reduce its effectiveness.

### **Determining your purpose**

As the writer of the report, you should have a thorough understanding of why it is needed and exactly what its focus should be. This information will affect how you organise the details or information. The reason can be to provide information so a decision can be made or a specific action taken. It could also be to analyse a situation and make a recommendations.

### **8.6.2 STAGE 2: COMPILING DATA**

The ultimate value of a report depends greatly on the appropriateness and reliability of the information in it. There are various methods of data collection, depending on the nature of the report. These methods include, for example:

#### **1. Primary research methods:**

- ✓ Face to face interviews (qualitative method)
- ✓ Focus groups interviews (qualitative method)
- ✓ Questionnaires (it can be qualitative/quantitative or both)
- ✓ Observations (qualitative method)

#### **2. Secondary research methods:**

- ✓ Books (qualitative method)
- ✓ Journals (qualitative method)
- ✓ Internet sources (qualitative method)
- ✓ Certain company records (qualitative method)

### **8.6.3 STAGE 3: CLASSIFYING DATA**

Because reports often deal with a great deal of information, report writers need to organise the information into reader-friendly sections. See 8.7 below.

### **8.6.4 STAGE 4: WRITING YOUR REPORT**

Now that you have seen how to group information in a report, it is time to start writing your report. As you draft the information you have collected into the various sections of your report, the appropriate writing style must be considered.

#### **8.6.4.1 Report-writing style**

- ✓ Reports are written in a formal register
- ✓ They should be objective and impersonal
- ✓ The same rules of clarity and conciseness that apply to academic and business writing apply to report writing.

#### **8.6.4.2 Some common pitfalls to be avoided when writing reports**

- ✓ Avoid informal register
- ✓ Avoid emotional terms
- ✓ Avoid first person pronouns.

### **8.7 BASIC ELEMENTS OF AN INVESTIGATIVE REPORT**

1. Title
2. Terms of Reference
3. Procedures
4. Findings
5. Conclusions
6. Recommendations
7. Ending

#### **8.7.2 ELEMENTS OF AN INVESTIGATIVE REPORT DEFINED:**

##### **1. TITLE**

Must be brief and specific. Think of a problem that you may be asked to investigate and on which you will have to report. Write the title for the report in your notebook.

EXAMPLE:

Report on the possibility of introducing tablets for ICT students.

## **2. TERMS OF REFERENCE**

- ✓ Aim and purpose of the report
- ✓ Name of the official who asked you to compile the report and his/ her capacity
- ✓ Date on which you received the instruction and the due date for submission
- ✓ Brief introduction of the problem

## **3. PROCEDURES**

The procedure should summarise key details of:

- ✓ How your data/information was collected
- ✓ What sources of information did you use
- ✓ Who was involved
- ✓ How many participants were involved
- ✓ When the investigation was done
- ✓ Where the investigation was done.

### **EXAMPLES:**

- ✓ Interviews were conducted with 20 ICT second year students.
- ✓ Questionnaires were distributed to all members of staff in the ICT Faculty.

## **4. FINDINGS**

- ✓ Objectively list the results (what you discovered) from each procedure
- ✓ You do not draw any conclusion or give your opinion at this stage
- ✓ Realistic facts and figures should be given.



EXAMPLE:

Based on the procedures above it was found that:

- ✓ Students normally struggled with internet access from the labs and that affected their assignment submissions.
- ✓ 80% of lecturers described their frustration of marking untyped work and students who did not have access to myTUTor.

## **5. CONCLUSIONS**

- ✓ State clearly what you think the facts or statistics show.
- ✓ Comment on the significance of the factual information given in the findings.
- ✓ Conclusions must follow as logically and as naturally from your findings.

EXAMPLE:

From the evidence in the findings above, it was clear that:

- ✓ Students struggled with access to computers due to the lack of resources in the labs.

## **6. RECOMMENDATIONS**

- ✓ Suggest what you think can be done to improve the situation
- ✓ Be specific and practical
- ✓ Recommendations should also follow a logical progression from your findings.

EXAMPLES:

It is recommended that:

- ✓ Students should be given funding for tablets through.....

- ✓ Wi fi spots should be available in the residences.

## **7. CLOSING**

- ✓ Writer's signature
- ✓ Initials and surname
- ✓ Position
- ✓ Date of completion

### **8.8 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS DURING DATA COLLECTION** *(For self-study)*

Focusing on the etymology of ethics, Bless, Higson-Smith and Sithole (2013: 28) reveal that the word 'ethics' is derived from the Greek word *ethos*, meaning one's character or disposition. It is related to term 'morality,' derived from the Latin word '*moralis*', meaning one's manners or character.

From an ethical point of view, Strydom (2011: 113) advocates that research should be based on mutual trust, acceptance, cooperation, promises and well acceptable conventions and expectations between all parties (in most cases, the relationship between the researcher and participants) in a research project.

Bless, Higson-Smith and Sethole (2013: 200) articulate that the study of research ethics helps to prevent research abuse and assists investigators in understanding their responsibilities as ethical scholars. Within the ambit of the process mentioned in 4.6.2, the following salient ethical issues are identified and stressed.

#### **8.8.2 Harm to research participants**

Creswell (2003: 64) advocates that the researcher has an ethical obligation to protect participants within all possible limits from any form of physical or emotional discomfort that may emerge from the research project. Emotional harm to subjects is often more difficult to determine than physical discomfort, but often has more far-reaching consequences for participants.

Therefore, it is the responsibility of the researcher to ensure that both physical and emotional discomfort are not experienced during the process of conducting research. One may cogently argue that in social sciences, physical discomfort is something that it is unlikely to happen unlike emotional discomfort which is imminent especially if the researcher does not pay attention to sensitive questions.

### **8.8.3 Voluntary participation**

According to Rubin and Babbie (2005: 71), participation should at all times be voluntary and no one should be forced to participate in a project. By sharing a similar perspective, Bless *et al.* (2013: 32) articulate that research participants have a right to know what the research is about, how it will affect them, the risks and benefits of participation, and the fact that they have the right to decline to participate or discontinue their participation at any time during the process if they choose to do so. During the process of data collection, it is the responsibility of the researcher to remind the participants that to participate in a research study is their legal right which can be withdrawn at any time or stage without providing a justification for such withdrawal.

### **8.8.4 Anonymity and confidentiality**

With regards to the concepts of anonymity and confidentiality, Babbie (2014: 68) acknowledges that the clearest concern in guarding the subject's interests and well-being is the protection of their identity, especially in survey research. It is worth pointing out that both terms (anonymity and confidentiality) are often confused by both emerging and potential researchers. Anonymity is guaranteed in a research project when neither the researcher nor the readers of the findings can identify a given response with a given respondent while

confidentiality is when a research project guarantees confidentiality when the researcher can identify a given person's responses but promises to do so publicly.

In extremely simple terms, the concepts of anonymity and confidentiality concerned themselves with the identity of the participants. In taking into account the political sensitivity of the onomastic problem under study, it is the responsibility of the researcher to ensure that the biographical information excludes personal information such as surnames and full names. Furthermore, when reporting about findings of the research, the researcher used letter codes (R1=Respondent one; and P1=Participant one) to refer to certain respondents and participants for data analysis purposes.

#### **8.8.5 Compensation**

In contemporary South Africa, the issue of compensation is currently a problematic one. Especially in taking into account the fact that people tend to be reluctant to participate in a project that will not benefit them financially. It is however, important to state that the participants will be informed that there is no financial benefit that should be expected for participating in a study.

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