

REPORT WRITING

Reports are a very common genre of writing at university across many subjects, including the sciences, business and professional degrees, because they are an effective way of communicating information.

Unlike essays, reports usually have a formal structure broken down into sections and sub-sections. Depending on your subject, you may be asked to write reports that have a pre-defined structure (such as a lab report) or reports in which you define and name the sections (such as some business reports). Whatever structure your report has, its main aim is to order and communicate the relevant information in an easily navigable way.

As reports are an informative genre of writing, they usually have a specific purpose and an intended audience who has reasons for reading the report. The audience (even if it is just your lecturer) will expect the information to be ordered in a certain way and each section to be written appropriately in order to play its role in communicating that information. This is why it is important to check any guidance you have been given on the structure and content of your report and to put the right information in the right sections. The advice in this guide will help you understand the features, structures and writing styles of reports.

Features of good reports

Students often ask, "What's the difference between an essay and a report?" It can be confusing because university assignments can mix the features of both (e.g. an essay that allows sub-headings) and some assignments may not officially be called a report, but seem very "report-like" in their structure and criteria.

The guidance on this page will explain some of the key differences between essays and reports, and how the main features of reports make them

economical to read. Understanding how reports are read and the features that make them effective will help you in any report-style assignment.

What is a report?

A report is a piece of informative writing that describes a set of actions and analyses any results in response to a specific brief. A quick definition might be: "This is what I did and this is what it means." You may be given an assignment which is not called a report but shares many of the same features; if so, aspects of this guide will be helpful.

It may help to know some of the key differences between reports and essays:

Essays

- * Argumentative and idea-based
- * Semi-structured
- * Not written with a specific reader in mind (except the marker)
- * Written in single narrative style throughout
- * Usually do not include sub-headings
- * Usually do not include bullet points
- * Usually no tables or graphs
- * Offer conclusions about question

Reports

- * Informative and fact-based
- * Formally structured
- * Usually written with a specific purpose and reader in mind
- * Written in style appropriate to each section
- * Always include section headings
- * Often use bullet points

- * Often includes tables or graphs
- * Offer recommendations for action

What makes a successful report?

Here are some of the most common complaints about reports:

- ✗ Badly structured
- ✗ Inappropriate writing style
- ✗ Incorrect or inadequate referencing
- ✗ Doesn't answer the brief
- ✗ Too much/too little/irrelevant material
- ✗ Expression not clear
- ✗ Doesn't relate results to purpose
- ✗ Unnecessary use of jargon

Tip... The most important thing to do is read the brief (or the title of your assignment, or your research question) carefully. Then read it again even more carefully! If you're still not completely clear about what to do, speak to your tutor or a Study Adviser – don't guess.

How can you make sure your report does what it's meant to do, and does it well?

Make sure you know which sections your report should have and what should go in each. Reports for different disciplines and briefs will require different sections: for instance, a business report may need a separate Recommendations section but no Methods section. Check your brief carefully to make sure you have the correct sections. See the page on 'Structuring your report' in this guide to learn more about what goes where.

Remember that reports are meant to be informative: to tell the reader what was done, what was discovered as a consequence and how this relates to the reasons the report was undertaken. Include only relevant material in your background and discussion.

A report is an act of communication between you and your reader. So pay special attention to your projected reader, and what they want from the report. Sometimes you will be asked to write for an imaginary reader (e.g. a business client). In this case it's vital to think about why they want the report to be produced (e.g. to decide on the viability of a project) and to make sure you

respond to that. If it's your tutor, they will want to know that you can communicate the processes and results of your research clearly and accurately, and can discuss your findings in the context of the overall purpose.

Write simply and appropriately. Your method and findings should be described accurately and in non-ambiguous terms. A perfectly described method section would make it possible for someone else to replicate your research process and achieve the same results. See the page in this guide on 'Writing up your report' for more on this.

Spend time on your discussion section. This is the bit that pulls the whole piece together by showing how your findings relate to the purpose of the report, and to any previous research.

Every idea and piece of information you use that comes from someone else's work must be acknowledged with a reference. Check your brief, or department handbook for the form of referencing required (usually a short reference in the body of the text, and a full reference in the Reference List at the end).

Be clear about the scope of the report. The word count will help you to understand this. For instance, a 5000 word report will be expected to include a lot more background and discussion than a 1000 word report - this will be looking for more conciseness in the way you convey your information.

How are reports read?

Research on how managers read reports discovered that they were most likely to read (in order): the abstract or summary; then the introduction; then the conclusions; then the findings; then the appendices.

This is not to suggest that you should spend less time on writing up your findings. But it does show that the sections you may think of as less important (like the abstract or introduction) are actually often the places a reader gets their first impressions. So it's worth getting them right.

Checklist for successful reports

- * Does it answer the purpose stated (or implied) in the brief?
- * Does it answer the needs of the projected reader?
- * Has the material been placed in the appropriate sections?
- * Has all the material been checked for accuracy?
- * Are graphs and tables carefully labelled?
- * Is data in graphs or tables also explained in words and analysed?
- * Does the discussion/conclusion show how the results relate to objectives set out in the introduction?
- * Has all irrelevant material been removed?
- * Is it written throughout in appropriate style (i.e. no colloquialisms or contractions, using an objective tone, specific rather than vague)?
- * Is it jargon-free and clearly written?
- * Has every idea taken from or inspired by someone else's work been acknowledged with a reference?
- * Have all illustrations and figures taken from someone else's work been cited correctly?
- * Has it been carefully proof-read to eliminate careless mistakes?

Structuring your report

The structure of a report has a key role to play in communicating information and enabling the reader to find the information they want quickly and easily. Each section of a report has a different role to play and a writing style suited to that role. Therefore, it is important to understand what your audience is expecting in each section of a report and put the appropriate information in the appropriate sections.

The guidance on this page explains the job each section does and the style in which it is written. Note that all reports are different so you must pay close attention to what you are being asked to include in your assignment brief. For instance,

your report may need all of these sections, or only some, or you may be asked to combine sections (e.g. introduction and literature review, or results and discussion). The video tutorial on structuring reports below will also be helpful, especially if you are asked to decide on your own structure.

Organising your information

Unlike essays, reports have formal structures:

- * When writing an essay, you need to place your information to make a strong argument
- * When writing a report, you need to place your information in the appropriate section

Consider the role each item will play in communicating information or ideas to the reader, and place it in the section where it will best perform that role. For instance:

- * Does it provide background to your research? (Introduction or Literature Review)
- * Does it describe the types of activity you used to collect evidence? (Methods)
- * Does it present factual data? (Results)
- * Does it place evidence in the context of background? (Discussion)
- * Does it make recommendations for action? (Conclusion)

Tip... Reports for different briefs will require different sections to be included. Check your brief carefully for the sections to include in your final report.

Abstract / Executive summary

The abstract / executive summary... is the 'shop window' for your report. It is the first (and sometimes the only) section to be read and should be the last to be written. It should enable the reader to make an informed decision about whether they want to read the report itself. Length depends on the extent of the work reported - usually a paragraph or two and always less than a page. It should briefly explain:

- * the purpose of the work
- * methods used for research

- * main conclusions reached
- * any recommendations

Introduction

The introduction... should explain the rationale for undertaking the work reported on, and the way you decided to do it. Include what you have been asked (or chosen) to do and the reasons for doing it.

- State what the report is about. What is the question you are trying to answer? If it is a brief for a specific reader (e.g. a feasibility report on a construction project for a client), say who they are.
- Describe your starting point and the background to the subject: e.g., what research has already been done (if you have to include a Literature Review, this will only be a brief survey); what are the relevant themes and issues; why are you being asked to investigate it now?
- Explain how you are going to go about responding to the brief. If you are going to test a hypothesis in your research, include this at the end of your introduction. Include a brief outline of your method of enquiry. State the limits of your research and reasons for them, e.g.

"Research will focus on native English speakers only, as a proper consideration of the issues arising from speaking English as a second language is beyond the scope of this project".

Literature review

The literature review surveys publications (books, journals and sometimes conference papers) on work that has already been done on the topic of your report. It should only include studies that have direct relevance to your research.

Introduce your review by explaining how you went about finding your materials, and any clear trends in research that have emerged. Group your texts in themes. Write about each theme as a separate section, giving a critical summary of each piece of work, and showing its relevance to your research. Conclude with how the review has informed your research (things you'll be building on, gaps you'll be filling etc).

Methods

The methods should be written in such a way that a reader could replicate the research you have done. State clearly how you carried out your investigation. Explain why you chose this particular method (questionnaires, focus group, experimental procedure etc). Include techniques and any equipment you used. If there were participants in your research, who were they? How many? How were they selected?

Write this section concisely but thoroughly – Go through what you did step by step, including everything that is relevant. You know what you did, but could a reader follow your description?

Results / Data / Findings

The results / data / findings... This section has only one job, which is to present the findings of your research as simply as possible. Use the format that will achieve this most effectively: e.g. text and (if appropriate) graphs, tables or diagrams. Don't repeat the same information in two visual formats (e.g. a graph and a table).

Label your graphs and tables clearly. Give each figure a title and describe in words what the figure demonstrates. Save your interpretation of the results for the Discussion section.

Discussion

The discussion... is probably the longest section. It brings everything together, showing how your findings respond to the brief you explained in your introduction and the previous research you surveyed in your literature review. This is the place to mention if there were any problems (e.g. your results were different from expectations, you couldn't find important data, or you had to change your method or participants) and how they were, or could have been, solved.

Conclusion

The conclusions... should be a short section with no new arguments or evidence. This section should give a feeling of closure and completion to your report. Sum up the main points of your research. How do they answer the original brief?

for the work reported on? This section may also include:

- * Recommendations for action
- * Suggestions for further research

Reference list / Bibliography

In the reference list / bibliography...make sure you include full details for any works you have referred to in the report. It's important to check that you are using the correct style of referencing for your discipline, so check any instructions you may have been given, and ask your tutor if you're not sure.

If you're unsure about how to cite a particular text, ask at the Study Advice information desk (12-4, Mon-Fri in term time) or at Library Information Desk on any of the subject floors.

Appendices

The appendices...include any additional information that may help the reader but is not essential to the report's main findings; for instance, interview questions, raw data, or a glossary of terms used. Label all appendices and refer to them where appropriate in the main text (e.g. 'See Appendix A for an example questionnaire').

Writing up your report

Reports are professional documents so need to be written in a formal and concise style. The audience does not want to search through irrelevant or rambling writing to find the information they need. Keep returning to your report criteria or brief to ensure you are fulfilling the aims, and to test whether the information you want to include is relevant.

The advice on this page will help you write reports that are to the point and professional, and will suggest an effective order for writing the different sections of your report.

Good writing style

When you write a report you are communicating your knowledge about a set of actions to a

reader. The key here is communication. A good piece of advice is to 'write to express, not to impress'. Here are some tips for achieving this:

- * Write in paragraphs which have one main point that you introduce, expand on, and summarise
- * Using shorter sentences avoids over-complexity
- * Avoid using colloquialisms and informality in academic writing
- * Write words out in full, for instance use 'do not' instead of 'don't'
- * Do use appropriate technical terms, but try to avoid jargon – consider who is likely to read your report and whether they will understand the terms you use
- * Make sure you know how to use punctuation and grammar correctly to make your work look professional

Writing academically

Writing academically means writing in such a way that your information sounds credible and authoritative. It does not mean:

- * Using long words
- * Writing complicated sentences with lots of semi-colons and colons

Some suggestions to help you write academically...

Be objective – report what the evidence tells you even if it isn't what you hoped to find. Don't present unsupported or personal opinions: for instance, 'Unsurprisingly, participants who recycled their refuse more regularly were also nicer people'. Take a balanced view.

Be accurate – give clear non-subjective descriptions ('light blue' is better than 'sky blue') and definite figures ('after twenty five minutes', '80% of the participants'). Avoid vague or ambiguous terms like 'a long period of time', or 'most of the participants'.

Be direct – don't leave it to your reader to work out what you are saying! Putting the emphasis on a strong verb can help the reader to see the important points: for instance, 'an analysis was

performed on the results' is not as direct as 'the results were analysed'.

Be critical – evaluate your own work as well as that of others. Have the confidence to say if something could have been done better if it had been done differently.

Be appropriate – identify the purpose of your communication and the audience you are communicating to. Give them the information they need to understand your work.

Tip... It always used to be recommended in academic writing that you used the passive voice - 'the experiment was conducted' rather than 'we conducted the experiment'. Many people recognise now that this can make writing pompous and overly complicated. It's worth considering whether using the active voice (i.e. I did, we did) will make the actions you are reporting easier to understand. Check any instructions you have for guidelines on this - if in doubt, use the passive voice.

The writing process

Reports are written to describe work completed in response to a particular brief, either one that has been given to you, or one you have set up yourself. So:

- * write in the past tense (as you are reporting on what has already happened)
- * always keep the brief in mind while you are writing

An important difference between essays and reports to bear in mind:

- * essays are written in a single narrative voice from beginning to end
- * reports are written in sections which may use different styles of writing, depending on the purpose of the section

So, for instance:

- * your Methods and Results sections will be descriptive
- * your Introduction will be explanatory
- * your Literature Review and Discussion sections will be analytical

A suggested order for writing the main sections...

1. Methods and Data/Results: As a rough guide, the more factual the section, the earlier you should write it. So sections describing 'what you did and what you found' are likely to be written first.
2. Introduction and Literature Survey: Sections that explain or expand on the purpose of the research should be next: what questions are you seeking to answer, how did they arise, why are they worth investigating? These will help you to see how to interpret and analyse your findings.
3. Discussion: Once you've established the questions your research is seeking to answer, you will be able to see how your results contribute to the answers, and what kind of answers they point to. Write this early enough that you still have time to fill any gaps you find.
4. Conclusions and Recommendations: These should follow logically from your Discussion. They should state your conclusions and recommendations clearly and simply.
5. Abstract/Executive Summary: Once the main body is finished you can write a succinct and accurate summary of the main features.

Finishing touches

If you're going to go to the trouble of writing an excellent report, it's a shame to spoil it with careless finishing. If you give yourself time to check details you can make your presentation as good as your content.

Referencing – Your course handbook should explain the style of referencing preferred by your department. Check that you have all the necessary details in the right places. If you've lost the details of a source, don't include it – unacknowledged sources could be read as plagiarism.

Proof reading – Print your work off to proof read – you are more likely to spot errors. It can help to read aloud. Use spell and grammar checkers wisely – make sure changes won't affect what you wanted to say.

Title page, contents, list of illustrations – Not all reports will need all of these sections. If yours does, they will probably be the last sections to write, once you are certain that the page order will not change.

Tip... A well-presented report looks professional and gives the impression that its author cared about getting things right – you can lose marks by not doing this properly! Check whether your department has advice on the exact format. Much of the information you will need will be accessible online, on Blackboard or your School's website. If you can't find information about deadlines, referencing etc, ask someone. Don't guess – guessing wrong could cost you marks.

This guide reproduces the text of our LibGuide on **Report Writing**. The online guide has links to additional information and can be found at:

<https://libguides.reading.ac.uk/reports>

For tips and guidance on other academic skills, see the Study Advice website at

www.reading.ac.uk/library/study-advice