# SI 501: Background Research Report
**[Individual Task]**

## Objectives

- To practice *synthesis* when writing reports.
- To research your client organization / design challenge target group or problem domain.
- To gain knowledge that will inform your interviews and observations.
- To create content that is useful for the client. (Portions of it may contribute to your team's final report.)

## Assignment

You will write a ~2000-word report that provides background information related to your client, project. Though only the final submission (due Oct. 11) will be graded, you will be required to submit any work toward it each week until then.

- **Choose a topic.** Discuss with your team, so that team members cover different aspects of the client, project, design challenge, or related topics. *It's OK if there is some overlap*, but avoid having every team member write about exactly the same thing. Anticipate what kind of information might be useful to your team or the client. Try to choose an aspect to write about that is interesting to you. (Otherwise, it will be a very tedious assignment.) Potential topic types include those listed below. This is *not* an exhaustive list, so if you think of other useful things to write about, feel free.

  - **General background about the problem:** What can you learn about the type of challenge or concern? What are the common sub-problems and solutions? For example, if your client is struggling with email communication, what is known about best practices in workplace email?
  - **General background about the client or target population:** Who is the client? What is their history, size, financial situation, main product/service, etc.? (Note: Use their website, but don't trust everything an organization says about itself. Try to find reliable sources well beyond it.) For design challenges, who is the target group? What are their demographics? Are there any available statistics about them? Go beyond stereotypes.
  - **Sector research:** What is known about the market or industry or sector that your client organization is a part of? What are the primary issues, concerns, societal trends and emerging technologies influencing the sector?
  - **Competitor analysis:** Who are your client's main peers or competitors, and what are their strengths and weaknesses? Compare and contrast peers and competitors with your client organization.
  - **Scholarly literature review**: What does the scholarly research say about the general class of problems, the type of organization, or potential solutions? What does scholarship say about what is already known and what questions remain? What theories and practices have been successful working within this type of organization or population?

- **Include a cover page at the front of your project** (*not* included in your word count) which includes the following information:

  - **Your name, team name, course name (SI 501), section number, GSI, client name, and report due date.** (Please include all of this information in everything you hand in for this course.)
  - **Word count for the report section only** (do not count cover page; do not count references)**.**
  - **Summary of either (1) your client organization's mission and product / service; or (2) the context of your design challenge.** One paragraph. (Ideally, this will be in your own words, but if you quote something, be sure it's in quotation marks and cited!)
  - **Summary of the client problem or the design challenge.** One paragraph.
  - **List 1-3 questions that your background research report will answer.**

- **Submit something ==every week before lecture until the submission== deadline in Canvas.** To make sure that everyone is making progress over the weeks, you will be asked to submit *something* in Canvas each week. The first week's submission is specified (see below). After, you can submit whatever you have at that point, even if it is just an outline or very rough writing. Instructors will review the first week's submission, but not the second and third weeks. However! Should you have any difficulty with the paper during the last week, we will be more sympathetic if there was evidence of attempted progress in the previous weeks. What to submit:
  - Sept. 27: Cover page and tentative bibliography (i.e., list of the sources you'll use for the background report) is *required*. If you can't find enough sources for your topic, you may want to consult with the SI librarian, Rebecca Welzenbach. In some cases, you may need to broaden or add on to your report topic.
  - Oct. 4: The following is *recommended*: Cover page, an outline, at least a few hundred words of draft, bibliography.
  - Oct. 11: Final submission is *required.*

- **Write a ~2000-word background research report** in which you *synthesize* background research about your client, client project, design challenge, target audience, or other related area. Team members should cover different aspects of the project in their reports. Below are some possible angles you could pursue. Depending on the topic and how much information is available, some of these categories could be further broken down. In other cases, it might require a combination of topics to reach 2000 words. (Submit the cover page *and* 2000-word report together by the beginning of lecture, Oct. 11.)

## Guidelines

- **Start doing research and writing drafts early**. Even though you have over a month for this assignment, the weeks pass quickly. Use the schedule above.

- **Write your report in essay form**, using prose paragraphs. While you may use bulleted lists, visualizations, and tables to better communicate *some* information, the bulk of your essay should be prose text.
- **Use high-quality sources** wherever possible. High-quality sources include news articles and associated blogs from trusted organizations (e.g., *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, CNN, NBC, *Harper's Magazine*, *The Atlantic*, etc.), peer-reviewed research articles, books published by major publishers, government documents, reliable statistics databases, and so on. MLibrary's LibGuide (http://guides.lib.umich.edu/si501) is also a useful place to start. The following tend to be less reliable: miscellaneous blogs, organizational websites, non-peer-reviewed whitepapers, social media content, etc. You can use these latter sources, but they should not form the main part of your research.
- **Synthesize** what you have learned. Avoid simply copying, paraphrasing, and summarizing other writing – there is no point stringing together things other people have already written. Instead, integrate the information you find and combine it with your own analysis. Synthesis involves any or all of the following: clustering of information from different sources; organizing information by concept (not by source); highlighting patterns; identifying unusual or unexpected findings; comparing and contrasting among sources; prioritizing information based on its relevance or importance; making deductive or inductive inferences; drawing conclusions; etc.
- **Follow these guidelines of good non-fiction writing:** Ensure that each paragraph has a single, coherent point, and summarize that point in a topic sentence at the beginning of the paragraph. Similarly, start each section with a brief introductory paragraph that either summarizes or introduces the section. (Experienced writers should feel free to deviate from these guidelines where it makes sense.) Think of the reader of your report as its user; to design a user-centered report, make it easy for the reader to understand what you want to convey.
- **Write in your own voice while employing a professional tone**, as you should for any consulting report. Portions of your report may eventually be incorporated into your final report that is provided to the client. Strive to write as well as *you* can. If writing in English is not your strength, that's OK – do your best.
- **Cite your sources:** Use in-text or footnoted citations for any content that is taken from another source, whether it is quoted or paraphrased. Any cut-and-pasted text should be in quotation marks (or block indented), with appropriate citation. Write in your own words, even if English is not your native language; avoid "patchwriting." Include a bibliography at the end. Citations may be in any standard style (*e.g.*, Chicago, APA, MLA), but apply the style correctly and consistently. If your project includes images, cite them appropriately, also. Especially if you have little experience writing papers at the university level in the United States, be sure that you fully understand what plagiarism is. In previous years, some students received a "0" on this assignment and were reported to the UMSI administration because of plagiarism.
- **Format for clarity**: Use section headings and white space effectively to promote readability and clarity. Any formatting that improves the "look and feel" of the document *and* which improves readability is good.
- **Feel free to revise the cover page as well as the outline for your report** between the two submissions.
- **Take advantage of the Sweetland Center for Writing, in the first floor of North Quad** (https://lsa.umich.edu/sweetland/graduates/writing-workshop.html). This is especially

recommended if English is not your first language, or if you have little experience writing papers for U.S. university courses. Meetings are one-on-one and appointment-based. Schedule early!

## Submissions

- Each week until the deadline, submit whatever you have (even if it's unintelligible drafts) before the beginning of lecture.
  - Submit your work as a PDF or Word (.doc or .docx) document in the assignments tab of your section's Canvas site. Do *not* submit a link to a Google Doc or any other document that could continue to be edited after the due date.
  - Please use this document naming convention:
    *Lastname Firstname Background Report.xxx*

- The final cover page and ~2000-word report are due by the beginning of class, Oct. 11.
  - Submit your work as a PDF or Word (.doc or .docx) document in the assignments tab of your section's Canvas site. Do *not* submit a link to a Google Doc or any other document that could continue to be edited after the due date.
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## Grading

- The outline will be graded pass/fail.

- *Any* instances of plagiarism will mean a 0 for the assignment. Please be careful.

- The report is graded on an individual basis (not as a team), out of 100. Grading will be weighted as follows:
  - Cover page                                              10%
  - Quality and quantity of sources              10%
  - Overall quality of the content                  50%
    - Content
    - Synthesis
    - Clarity
    - Organization
    - Flow
  - Writing quality, including spelling, grammar, etc.    10%
  - Formatting, overall look and feel              10%
  - Citation quality (in-text citations, references)      10%
  - Extra credit for superb work                    up to 5%

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