

## Report Writing

**This is some general feedback given to previous students based upon their report writing assignments.**

Professional employment (and your study at UoP) will demand that you produce written reports, and a certain quality of English will of course be expected. Quality really does make a significant difference to a reader's ability to understand your message; at UoP, if your marker can't understand your message, then you're obviously not going to get many marks. There are a number of perennial problems that I see in students' writing.

### **1. Keep your sentences short(er)**

This is the most common and serious problem. 30 words is a very long sentence which will need careful construction (with proper use of punctuation) to be intelligible. Normally I would expect the vast majority of sentences to be shorter than 20 words. Examine the sentences in this document; how many have more than 20 words?

A sentence should be cohesive: it should convey one idea, point or thought, or a closely connected range of ideas.

Use commas, semicolons and colons appropriately<sup>1</sup>.

Use commas to separate out the differing parts of a sentence; consider where the natural pauses are. The most common problem is failure to use commas, but overuse can also be a problem.

The semicolon (;) can be used to link two related sentences when the use of a full stop or a conjunction (such as "and") would be awkward. If you wish, you can think of a semicolon as a pause that is longer than a comma, but shorter than a full stop.

"The purpose of the new formation seemed to be clear; however, this soon changed."

A clause is a group of words containing a verb and a subject; a strong clause is one that can stand on its own. Two strong clauses should be separated by a conjunction (e.g., and, or, but, for), a semicolon or a full stop; they should not be separated by only a comma. For example:

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<sup>1</sup> The correct use of grammar is certainly more complicated than is suggested in this document. For a fuller account, see for example [www.grammarbook.com](http://www.grammarbook.com)

“The match was great, United are always great.”

Here a semicolon would have been appropriate. When joining two strong clauses with a conjunction, use a comma as well unless both clauses are short. For example:

“The coding was completed well before Xmas, but the testing has encountered significant delays.”

Inappropriate joining of strong clauses is a very common error which is often used to construct excessively long and unreadable sentences.

The colon (:) can be used instead of a semicolon when the second sentence in some sense explains or illustrates the first.

“His attitude to defence was obvious: attack is the best form of defence.”

## **2. Don't use conversational English**

Try to maintain an appropriate level of formality in your writing. Quite often I see English that might be fine in casual writing or conversation, but which has no place in a professional business report. Avoid slang.

So for example I might say “His work was rubbish”, but I would not use these words in a professional report. Instead, I might write: “The argument presented in the work was groundless”, “The work was very poorly presented”, “The quality of the work was unacceptable”, etc. As well as making the point more professionally, these examples provide a bit more precision: casual phrases often tend to lack careful thought and therefore detail. Notice also the elimination of the word “His”; this creates a more professional (and less personal) feel, but also avoids the suggestion of an explicit personal attack.

## **3. Be concise**

Consider carefully the point that you wish to make; don't simply use the first set of words that comes to mind. Remove additional words, convolutions and unnecessary digressions. Digressions in the middle of a sentence interrupt the flow. This is a common problem relating to points 2 and 4.

#### **4. Polish, polish, polish and then polish some more**

Most professional documents go through a very large number of versions: 20 might not be unusual. The first few drafts of a report will typically be littered with errors as well as lacking in some of the content. Remember that your marker may well have just read 50 essays before they get to yours; you are doing yourself no favours by obscuring your message behind poorly constructed English.

As well as improving readability, polishing removes trivial errors. A failure to remove these sends a clear message to the marker that your work has not been conscientiously produced.

#### **5. Paragraphs should be cohesive**

Each paragraph should have a clear, single, well-defined purpose; what is the fundamental message that you're trying to get across in this paragraph? You can use this principle to construct your report top-down: consider the fundamental points that you need to make, decide which order they should come in, write a paragraph or two for each, and then add appropriate statements to link the differing parts. (Admittedly, this is something of an over-simplification.)

Long paragraphs (longer than 10 lines) are candidates for splitting (in some sensible fashion). I would suggest that readability is improved by having a slight physical space between paragraphs.

For example, here I have started a new paragraph without a physical space and you can see the problem: it's hard going!

On the other hand, here I have started a new paragraph with a slight space; it is so much easier on the eye, and on the brain.

#### **6. Font**

The general recommendation is to use a sans serif font such as Calibri, Arial or Tahoma (I personally prefer Calibri, but that's simply a personal preference).

I'd suggest avoiding Times New Roman: apart from being a serif font, it really does look dated.

<p>It is traditional for you to now point out the grammatical errors in this document. Choose your moment with care!</p>
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