

## CHAPTER 14

### REPORT WRITING

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#### **Introduction:**

As a researcher, when you have gathered the materials relevant to your subject matter through the various means discussed in other aspects of this book, you need to package the findings in such a way as to facilitate easy absorption by your readers. It is often in the form of a report. Thus, a completed research work is presented as a report. Our focus in this chapter is thus to take you through the process of writing reports in ways that will adequately answer a reader's questions such as what happened, where, why, when and how it happened.

**Learning Outcomes:** At the end of the module, you should be able to:

- (i) organise report according to their structure, language and tone;
- (ii) specify if the types of reports accurately achieve their purposes; and
- (iii) compose a report of any type.

#### **Main Content:**

##### **What is a Report?**

Generally, a report is said to be a body of facts written down for preservation. Specifically, a report is a **description** of the investigation that you as an individual or your group have completed. Weissberg and Buker (1990 p. 1) describe the experimental research report as 'a paper written by an investigator to describe a research study that he or she has completed.' In this instance, the report explicitly explains the problem investigated, steps taken in the experiment and results obtained from the investigation.

A report is also the **record** of events or activities of a group of people neatly encapsulated for the consumption of the appropriate person or body. Such events are simply and faithfully set down as they occur, and may be disseminated to the public immediately or filed away for future reference. A report thus sets down events in such a way that all pertinent questions regarding what has been done, where the event took place, who are those directly and indirectly involved, how an action has been done, and what effects have been noticed or envisaged, and so on, are answered. For instance, when one narrates how an accident happened, one is giving a report. The sequences of events and utterances at a formal meeting of a group of people will also constitute a report.

##### **Purpose of Reports**

To make sure that your reader understands your report, you need to ensure that the pieces of information you give are neatly categorised so that all future actions expected from it are clearly recognised. This way, it can fulfill its purpose. How can you recognize the purpose of reports? You can recognise the purpose of reports by the things they do such as:

- a) **Explaining:** When you give a report, your reader must be able to understand exactly what happened and why. The main objective of your report in this case is to explain an action from all angles and provide interpretations of the event so that the reader can understand all its implications. It attempts to provide the basis for, and examines the underlying causes of, people's actions and the possible

consequences of such actions. Examples of this category are your reports on experiments, researches and investigative matters.

- b) **Informing:** This means that you recount a sequence of events for the purpose of acquainting your reader with the order in which these events occur. In most cases, the report simply keeps the record of events and satisfies the desire of the reader to know exactly when an event begins, what happens as it unfolds, at what points the significant happenings occur, and how it all ends. It satisfies the urge to know; there is no judgement involved neither does it require any significant interpretive processes. Examples of such reports are news reports and business meetings.
- c) **Documenting:** A report presents the facts of an event in the sequence and order in which it happens. In this way, it documents the event for posterity. In other words, it sets down the record of the event in written form so that it is never forgotten, even long after the main actors in the event have gone. This means that all books ever written are reports since they document events surrounding man and all his activities from the beginning of time. So also your activities, utterances and/or researches may someday be put together in a report that may be a story, biography or autobiography.
- d) **Summarising:** A report is only a record of events set down in a brief form. It is almost impossible to put down everything regarding an event or a subject or an experiment since such a venture would not only be wasteful but also boring. For example, it is unnecessary for an autobiographer to relate how many times in a day his heart beat or he breathed or an ant walked across his path, etc. We do not need to know the frustrations an experimenter endures during an experiment or how many times his beaker falls to the ground and breaks. We do not need to know how many times members of a group nearly exchange fisticuffs during a meeting. However, in concentrating on the important things about the day, e.g. location, dates, events, etc., the reader is given an idea of the event. Therefore, the highlights of the event or sequence are presented in such a way that they would represent the whole picture.
- e) **Teaching:** This brings us to the very important part that a report plays: it helps us to learn from events. An experimenter's report helps us to replicate the experiment. A narrator helps us to recognise mistakes made in an event through the causes and effects. An autobiographer helps us to learn from his/her decisions in life. From the minutes of a meeting, we learn what the group is doing, what mistakes are made and how to move forward. The didactic role that reports play cannot be downplayed. They exist to teach us great lessons about life.

## Structure of Reports

Now, purpose alone is not the only thing that distinguishes reports from other writings. One of the other things that differentiate reports concerns their structure. The structure of a report depends largely on its purpose and the use to which it is put. In the section above, we mentioned that reports could be employed either to explain, inform, document or teach. Each of these implies changes in structure in terms of length and language use.

In general, reports can be formal or informal. Formal reports provide accounts of projects, experiments or meetings, hence they are usually lengthy. From the long accounts, the reader can obtain some recommendations. On the other hand, informal reports may be brief and directed at specific groups. Business correspondences such as memoranda, letters or circulars may fall in this category.

Formal reports do not have any specifiable **length**. A report can range from a few paragraphs to a few pages to even volumes. The law report is published in volumes, experimental reports take only a number of pages while news reports are often only a few paragraphs or columns.

Greater differences lie in the sentence structure. In most cases, reports are written in declarative **sentences** which simply state facts. The sentences in the reports of business meetings, for instance, occur in the reported or indirect speech, since the utterances of participants are often just reported, hardly quoted directly. Only news reports sometimes resort to the direct statements of participants to give the sense of greater authenticity, recency and thus credibility while those reporting experiments are quite

often in the passive voice. As we examine the types of reports below, we will see how the structures differ from one to the other.

### **Types of Reports**

In general, reports can be classified into any of the following:

- a) Experimental
- b) Investigative
- c) Field Research
- d) Factual Reports
- e) Business Meetings
- f) Reviews

### **Language and Style of Reports**

The language of report writing is generally formal and impersonal. The form or structure is predominantly constrained by the genre. For instance, the format of memorandum report is different from minutes of a report of proceedings at a meeting. Remember that the strength of your own report lies in its accessibility. This is why you need to strive to use clear, concise and lucid prose that will not only make reading easy but will also make comprehension easy. Demarcate your sections appropriately and choose your words carefully. These will ensure that the purpose of your report is achieved.

### **Summary:**

This chapter has examined report writing with samples of the common genres provided as illustrations. Also, the chapter presents the various rungs, and how to write them.

### **Self-Assessment Questions:**

Putting yourself in the shoes of the Secretary, and following the structure of Minutes writing, write a report of the proceeding of a meeting you attended in the recent past.

### **Tutor Marked Assignment:**

In about 400 words, conduct a review of one of the products you consider to be new on the market, taking care to highlight what it is about, what you like or dislike about it, and how successful you think the product can be in the market.

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### **Further Reading:**

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