



Academic writing

Writing a report

What is a report?

Report writing differs from essay writing because it has a different purpose. Reports are common communication tools as they assist in the decision making process. Written for a particular purpose, they usually outline a problem, provide the relevant facts and ideas to the situation, and then recommend a course of action.

Reports are highly structured so that information they contain can be easily understood. Headings within the report allow the reader to select the parts they wish to read. Headings also enable each section of the report to stand alone. The structure of a report is enhanced through the use of subheadings, diagrams, tables, graphs, illustrations etc.

Why write reports?

You will be asked to write reports to show that you have investigated or researched a particular problem. The main purpose of a report is to provide information to the reader about something such as:

- how to solve a problem;
- description of a situation or process (perhaps with recommendations)
- the outcomes of a laboratory experiment or a research project that has been undertaken;
- the assessment of a client's needs; or
- an investigation of an incident, such as how a workplace accident occurred and what measures will be taken to prevent a similar incident from happening again.

The amount and type of information that is included in a report should be based on what the audience will need or want to know.

For example the information required in a report detailing the outcomes of a scientific experiment will differ from a business report detailing some potential marketing strategies for a new product (Bate & Sharpe, 2002, p. 161).

There are many report formats used in different academic disciplines and employment contexts. As a university student, you may be required to write the following types of report:

- analytical report,
- business report,
- scientific report,
- research report, or
- report on the outcomes of a specific project.

In some disciplines you will have to write reports for specific purposes such as:

- identifying patient health needs in a hospital setting,
- reporting the results of a laboratory experiment,
- or presenting the data which was collected during a field trip.

Format of a report

In the first instance you should always check with your lecturer or subject coordinator to find out what content and layout are required for the report you have to complete as an assessment task. The information may be included in your Subject Outline, or in your study materials.

In the absence of any specific guidelines, the following information about report formats may be useful.

Business reports Windschuttle & Elliot, 1999, p. 288	Laboratory reports Lindsay, 1996, p. 93	Investigative reports Brown & Cox, 1998, pp. 8-11	Research reports Hay, 1998, pp. 24-25
Letter of transmittal	Acknowledgements		Letter of transmittal
Title Page	Title	Type or purpose of report	Acknowledgements
Table of contents			Title page
Summary & Recommendations	Summary	Who or what caused you to take action? Who responded? When did they respond?	Table of contents
Introduction	Introduction		Executive Summary/Abstract
			Introduction (what you did and why)
			Literature review
Body	Materials and Methods	What happened? When, where, & how did it happen?	Materials and methods (how you did it)
	Results		Results (what you found out)
Conclusion	Discussion	Recommended action or Action taken	Discussion (what the results mean)
			Recommendations
Appendices			Appendices
Bibliography	References		References

A numbering system – especially for longer reports – is normally used to quickly indicate sections and levels within an report. Single numerals (1, 2, 3...) are used for the main headings; an additional numeral (1.1, 1.2, 1.3...) for second level of headings; and two additional numerals (1.1.1, 1.1.2,...) for any third level headings.

A report structure would look something like the following:

1. *Introduction*
 - 1.1 _____
 - 1.1.1 _____
 - 1.2 _____
 - 1.2.1 _____
2. *Methodology*
 - 2.1 _____
 - 2.1.1 _____
 - 2.1.2 _____
3. *Discussion*
 - 3.1 _____
 - 3.2 _____
 - 3.3 _____

Main sections of a report

The main sections of a report are described below. Depending on the type and purpose of the report you are writing, you may not have to include all of them.

Letter of transmittal/Acknowledgements

The letter of transmittal is a cover letter used to acknowledge the person or organisation who asked for the report to be completed. An acknowledgement section is included to recognise the efforts of those who contributed to the research or writing of the report (Windschuttle & Elliot, 1999, p. 288).

Title Page/Table of Contents

The title page and table of contents in a report, provide important guides which allow the reader to find the information they need quickly (Windschuttle & Elliot, 1999, p. 287).

Synopsis/Executive Summary/Abstract

The abstract is intended to give the reader an overview of the content they will find in your report. This should include the problem which was investigated, how it was examined and the main issues and recommendations raised in the discussion section. This allows the reader to preview the report and decide if it provides them with information that will be useful for them to know more about. If not then they can find a better source of information somewhere else (Windschuttle & Elliot, 1999, p. 289).

Introduction

The introduction is similar to an introduction in an essay because it states clearly what you intend to cover in your text. An introduction is different from an abstract, because it outlines what you intend to present in your report it does not summarise what you have achieved in your research. It also explains why you think your research is important and it can be used to explain how you collected and analysed the information which you will present in your report. However in some reports you may wish to cover some of this information in more detail in a separate Literature review, or Methods section (Bate & Sharpe, 2002, p. 164).

Literature review

A literature review provides the reader with an understanding of what else has been written about the topic of your report. It helps the reader to understand how your research fits in with and adds to existing knowledge about the topic of your report. It helps you to explain why your research was important to do (Anderson & Poole, 2001, p. 21).

1. Materials and Methods

The methods section provides enough detail to allow the reader to undertake the same research process or experiment that you are describing in your report. This section can include information about who participated in the research sample, equipment or software used for collection and analysis of information, and a step by step description of how the information was collected (Lindsay, 1996, p. 95). This section is commonly included in research or scientific reports, but not in business reports. A large portion of an investigative report deals with what was done to gather information, but the section is usually not called Methods (Holtz, 2001, p. 3).

2. Results

The results section includes a description of the major trends or outcomes discovered in the research for the report. A clear overview of this information can be provided in the form of tables, diagrams or charts (Bate & Sharpe, 2002, p. 165).

3. Discussion

This section of the report is used to show how the information or results of your research relate to the problem being addressed in a business situation or the thesis being tested in scientific research. This is where the report writer will explain why they got the results they did, and how this has an impact on the processes they were examining in their research. This can include the effects of this information outside the author's own organisation or discipline (Hay, 1998, p. 31).

4. Conclusion

As in an essay the conclusion is a summary of the main findings of the report with a statement about how they can be used to resolve the main problem or issue which the report is intended to address. This may include making recommendations about this problem (Bate & Sharpe, 2002, p. 165).

5. Recommendations

If there are obvious actions that can be taken as a result of the findings of a report, these are included in the form of recommendations. These may be included in the conclusion section. However, if one of the objectives of a business report has been to identify a process for organisational change, then it may be better to list the recommendations in a separate section (Windschuttle & Elliot, 1999, p. 289). In a research report the recommendations often indicate how the research project could be extended or improved in the future (Hay, 1998, p. 32). In a legal report, the recommendations usually identify who is responsible, and what the consequences are for involvement in an incident (Brown & Cox, 1998, p. 33).

6. References

You should use the required referencing style, when listing resources and references which contributed to the outcomes and findings of your report (Bate & Sharpe, 2002, p. 165). At CSU this is the APA Style; you are able to download a copy of the CSU guide, [APA Referencing Summary](#), from the Learning Skills website.

7. Appendices

Any detailed information, such as sample questionnaires, which is not essential for the reader to understand the outcomes or conclusions of a report, but which can provide them with a more complete understanding of how the information was collected or analysed should be included as an appendix. This allows them to refer to the material if they wish to (Bate & Sharpe, 2002, p. 165).

References

- Anderson, J. & Poole, M. (2001). *Thesis and assignment writing* (4th ed.). Brisbane: John Wiley & Sons. (Original work published in 1970)
- Bate, D. & Sharpe, P. (2002). *Writer's handbook for university students* (2nd ed.). Southbank: Thomson. (Original work published in 1996)
- Brown, J. G. & Cox, C. R. (1998). *Report writing for criminal justice professionals* (2nd ed.). Cincinnati, OH: Anderson Publishing Co.
- Hay, I. (1998). *Communicating in geography and the environmental sciences*. South Melbourne: Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1996)
- Holtz, L. E. (2001). *Investigative and operational report writing* (4th ed.). Longwood, FL: LexisNexis Gould Publications.
- Lindsay, D. (1996). *A guide to scientific writing* (2nd ed.). Melbourne: Addison Wesley Longman. (Original work published 1995)
- Windschuttle, K. & Elliot, E. (1999). *Writing, researching, communicating: Communication skills for the information age*. (3rd ed.). Roseville: McGraw-Hill.

Additional web resources

You can google for other sites by typing, for example, 'report writing' as the search term, *but try to ensure the sites you use are reliable sites*.

Example of a Government report

http://www.dest.gov.au/archive/highered/eippubs/eip99-6/eip99_6.pdf

Report writing

<http://www.deakin.edu.au/current-students/study-support/study-skills/handouts/report.php>

Uni Learning: a comprehensive academic writing website at the University of Wollongong. Choose the menu item for 'Report Writing'.

<http://unilearning.uow.edu.au/main.html>

What are research reports

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/workshops/hypertext/reportW>

Writing reports

<http://www.unisa.edu.au/ltu/student/learningAdvisors/reports.asp>

Writing technically: Writing the report

<http://www.academic-skills.soton.ac.uk/studyguides/WritingTechnicallyPartA.doc>