Report writing

Student & Library Services
Learning and Research Support
Aims and objectives

• Purpose of report writing
• What makes a good report
• Audience and purpose
• Structure of reports
  • Generic advice, not School specific
Activity 1

• What are your concerns regarding report writing? Write some ideas in the box then discuss with a neighbour.
Purpose of report writing

• “A report is the formal method of communicating the results of a project or research assignment.” (Cottrell, 2013)

• May cover:
  • What you did
  • How you did it
  • What you found out
  • Why your findings are important
  • Who it is for
Activity

• Which of these statements describes report writing?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Y/N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Written for a specific audience</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can contain diagrams, tables and figures</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discusses an issue or point of academic contention</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formally structured with headings and sub-headings</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An answer to a question</td>
<td>N</td>
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</tbody>
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Reports

- Need to focus on a specific brief
- Make recommendations supported by appropriate (referenced) evidence
- May be written for a specific audience established in the brief (e.g. a client etc.)
- Written in an appropriate style for each section (e.g. may use a different style for methods than for discussion)

Essays

- May have a broad scope – need to interpret and define the question
- Makes a coherent argument supported by appropriate (referenced) evidence
- Not usually written for a specific audience (apart from your lecturer)
- Written in a single style throughout
Questions to ask yourself

• What am I being asked to do?
• Who am I writing for?
• Why am I being asked to do it?
• How does my audience want the information presented?
• When does my audience want the report?
Report structure

You may want to consider some or all of these:
• Abstract/Executive summary
• Table of contents
• Introduction
• Methods/Procedures
• Results
• Discussion
• Conclusion/Recommendations
• References
• Appendices
Activity

- In groups, try to match up the sections of a report and their descriptions.
Answers

• Abstract
  • Does it provide a very brief overview of the entire research and findings?

• Introduction or Literature Review
  • Does it provide background to the research?

• Methods
  • Does it describe what was done to collect evidence?

• Results
  • Does it present factual data?

• Discussion
  • Does it consider what could be done with the research findings?

• Conclusion or Recommendations
  • Does it make recommendations for action or summarise the important points?
Different structures

- Structure can vary according to subject matter
- You might need to decide your own sub-headings
- You might be given a very specific structure to follow
Activity

• What makes a bad report?

• In your group discuss what you shouldn’t do when writing a report.
Academics who regularly set and mark reports said the following make a report bad:

- Doesn’t answer the brief
- Badly structured
- Inappropriate writing style
- Poor grammar and punctuation
- Incorrect or inadequate referencing
- Too much/too little/irrelevant material
- Expression not clear
- Doesn’t relate results to purpose
- Unnecessary use of jargon
So, what makes a good report?

- Answers the brief
- Well structured
- Appropriate writing style
- Good grammar and punctuation
- Well referenced
- Only includes relevant material
- Clear
- Relates results to purpose
- No jargon
Writing style for reports

• Have one main point per paragraph
  • For more details, we run an Academic Writing workshop

• Write to express, not to impress
  • Use short sentences

• Write in the third person
  • Avoid using I e.g. ‘The test was carried out’ not ‘I did the test’

• Write words out in full, for instance use ‘could not’ instead of ‘couldn’t’
Writing style for reports

• Be specific
  • Avoid vague terms like “for some time”

• Be objective
  • Report what you actually found, not what you wanted to find

• Be critical
  • What evidence is there to support your interpretations?

• Be concise
  • Edit unnecessary detail
Specific styles for reports

• Can use headings and sub-headings
• Can use diagrams and tables to illustrate points
  • Need to discuss these as they won’t explain themselves
  • Need to be clearly labelled
• Can use bullet points
• BUT – always check your criteria
Activity

Read the extract on the sheet, and highlight anything that isn’t appropriate for a report
After I added the solution to the beaker, the liquid went a really lurid green, which was unexpected, as this was not the same as the washed-out green colour it was supposed to go according to what the book said. I then stirred the beaker and left it for a little while. After several days, the mixture had settled to the bottom and dried out, which was not supposed to have happened; this was a bit of a problem.
References and resources

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LearnHigher (2012) *Report writing*. Available at: 
http://www.learnhigher.ac.uk/writing-for-university/report-writing
(Accessed: 02 September 2014).

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