Report writing

Student & Library Services
Content

• Purpose of report writing
• What makes a good report
• Audience and purpose
• Structure of reports
  • Generic advice, not School specific
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
Report writing compared with essay writing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reports</th>
<th>Essays</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Written for a specific audience</td>
<td>Not usually written for a specific audience (apart from your lecturer)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need to focus on a specific brief</td>
<td>May have a broad scope – need to interpret and define the question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make recommendations supported by appropriate (referenced) evidence</td>
<td>Makes a coherent argument supported by appropriate (referenced) evidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can contain diagrams, tables and figures</td>
<td>Shouldn’t contain diagrams etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formally structured with headings and sub-headings</td>
<td>Shouldn’t use headings and sub-headings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written in an appropriate style for each section (e.g. may use a different style for methods than for discussion)</td>
<td>Written in a single style throughout</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Questions to ask yourself

• **What am I being asked to do?** Check the project brief and module guide. Ensure you know whether the purpose of the report is to inform, test, persuade, advise, recommend etc.

• **Who am I writing for?** You need to know who your audience are (e.g. a professional body), what they already know and what they want to know.

• **Why am I being asked to do it?** You will need to make recommendations based on your findings.

• **How does my audience want the information presented?** Check guidance on structure, format and layout, including the word count.

• **When does my audience want the report?** Check the assignment deadline.
## Report structure
You may want to consider some or all of these:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract/Executive summary</td>
<td>Provides a very brief overview of the entire research and findings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table of contents</td>
<td>Even if this is not mentioned in your criteria, it is useful to have to signpost to your lecturer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>Gives the purpose of the report, aims and objectives, background</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods/Procedures</td>
<td>Describes what was done to collect evidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results</td>
<td>Presents factual data, stating what has been achieved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>Considers what could be done with the research findings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion/Recommendations</td>
<td>Makes recommendations for action and summarises the important points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>Needed as with every piece of academic work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendices</td>
<td>This could include transcripts of interviews, raw data etc. This can be useful to save your word count</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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
Academics who regularly set and mark reports said the following make a report bad:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Doesn’t answer the brief</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Badly structured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inappropriate writing style</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor grammar and punctuation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incorrect or inadequate referencing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too much/too little/irrelevant material</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expression not clear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doesn’t relate results to purpose - not sufficient testing or testing the wrong sample, questionnaire may not be asking the right questions. Keep your purpose in mind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unnecessary use of jargon</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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 have an Academic Writing guide: https://libguides.tees.ac.uk/academic_writing

• Write to express, not to impress
  • Use shorter 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”. The length of time something took can be important.

• Be objective
  • Report what you actually found, not what you wanted to find. If your results weren’t what you were expecting, you need to state this and discuss possible reasons why.

• Be critical
  • What evidence is there to support your interpretations? Where did the evidence come from – is it good quality?

• Be concise
  • Edit unnecessary detail. You have a word count like all other assignments, so use your words wisely
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
  • If your tables/diagrams came from another source, you need to reference them
• Can use bullet points
• BUT – always check your criteria
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.

1. Don’t use I
2. Avoid overly elaborate descriptions of colours – really lurid/washed out.
3. What book? Don’t include book details. Only cite the author and what they say should have happened
4. Vague terms – how long is a little while? Several days? Need to be specific
5. What exactly was the problem and why?
Improved language in a report

After the solution was added to the beaker, the liquid went bright green, which was unexpected. Smith (2019) states that it should have turned pale green in colour. The solution in the beaker was stirred and left for four days. After two days, the mixture had settled to the bottom and dried out, which was not supposed to have happened. The solution should have remained in liquid form. This could have been as a result of the temperature in the room (Jones, 2018).
References and resources


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LearnHigher (2012) *Report writing*. Available at:
http://www.learnhigher.ac.uk/writing-for-university/report-writing
(Accessed: 05 September 2019)


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