Basics of Writing Reports

When writing reports, make your audience's job as easy as possible. Use active verbs and short sentences and keep to the point, just as you would in any other kind of writing.

This guide covers the main stages of writing a report:

- Defining the purpose
- Investigating the topic
- Organising the report into sections
- Order of presentation
- Order of writing
- Numbering sections and paragraphs
- Planning the writing
- Revision

Defining the purpose

This helps you to be clear about:

- why you are writing;
- what to include;
- what to leave out; and
- who your readers are.

If you can express the purpose in a single sentence, so much the better.

Investigating the topic

How you do this depends on the topic and purpose. You may need to read, interview, experiment and observe. Get advice from someone more experienced if you need to.

Organising the report into sections

Your job is to make it easy for the readers to find the information they want.

In reports that are one or two pages long, readers should have no trouble finding their way around. With a 'long' report (more than four or five pages), you need to take great care in how you organise the information.

Reports can be set out in eight parts, but you won't always need them all.

- Title or title page
- Contents list
- Abstract

- Introduction
- Discussion
- Summary and conclusions
- Recommendations
- Appendix

A short report won't need a **title page**, but should have a title.

The **contents list** is only needed in long reports.

The **abstract** is only needed in formal reports, such as reports of scientific research. It is a summary of the report. The abstract appears in library files and journals of abstracts. It won't usually be printed with the report so it needs to be able to stand alone.

Keep it between 80 and 120 words. Don't confuse this with an 'executive summary' which we will talk about later.

The **introduction** should be brief and answer any of the following questions that seem relevant.

- What is the topic?
- Who asked for the report and why?
- What is the background?
- What was your method of working? If the method is long and detailed, put it in an appendix.
- What were the sources? If there are many, put them in an appendix.

The **discussion** is the main body of the report. It is likely to be the longest section, containing all the details of the work organised under headings and sub-headings.

Few readers will read every word of this section. So start with the most important, follow it with the next most important, and so on.

You should follow the same rule with each paragraph. Begin with the main points of the paragraph, then write further details or an explanation.

The **summary and conclusions** section is sometimes placed before the discussion section. It describes the purpose of the report, your conclusions and how you reached them.

The conclusions are your main findings. Keep them brief. They should say what options or actions you consider to be best and what can be learned from what has happened before. So they may include or may lead to your **recommendations**: what should be done in the future to improve the situation?

Often, writers will put the summary and conclusions and the recommendations together and circulate them as a separate document. This is often called an executive summary because people can get the information they need without having to read the whole report.

It may be better (and cheaper) to send everyone an executive summary, and only provide a copy of the full report if someone asks for it. You may save a few trees, and you will certainly save your organisation plenty of time and money.

The **appendix** is for material which readers only need to know if they are studying the report in depth. Relevant charts and tables should go in the discussion where readers can use them. Only put them in an appendix if they would disrupt the flow of the report.

Order of presentation

We recommend the following order of presentation. You won't always need all these sections, especially those in brackets.

Long reports

- Title or title page
- (Contents list)
- (Abstract)
- Introduction
- Summary and conclusions
- Recommendations
- Discussion
- (Appendix)

Short reports

- Title
- Introduction
- Discussion
- Summary and conclusions
- Recommendations
- (Appendix)

Order of writing

The order in which you write needn't follow the order of presentation.

We recommend the following order of writing, because each section you finish helps you write the next one.

- Introduction
- Discussion
- Summary and conclusions
- Recommendations
- (Abstract)
- Title or title page
- (Contents list)
- (Appendix)

After writing all the sections, read and revise them. Rewrite sections if necessary.

Numbering sections and paragraphs

If you use plenty of clear headings and have a full contents list at the start of the report, you should find this is enough to show where each part begins and ends, and to cross-refer if necessary.

If you do have to label sections and paragraphs, keep it as simple as possible. Use capital letters to label sections and numbers to label paragraphs (A1, A2 and so on). If necessary, use small letters on their own for parts of paragraphs.

Planning the writing

Usually you will have collected such a mass of information that you cannot decide where to plunge in and begin. So, before you start to write you must make some kind of plan.

This will save you hours of writing and will help to produce a better organised report.

Here are two different ways of planning.

An **outline** begins as a large, blank sheet of paper onto which you pour out all your facts, ideas, observations and so on, completely at random. Write in note form, and try to get everything down as fast as possible.

When you have got all your points on paper, start to organise them, group them, and assess them for strength, relevance, and their place in the report.

You can then number the points in order or put headings next to them such as 'Intro', 'Discussion', 'Conclusion' and so on. Use lines and arrows to link up related points.

Gradually you will create a network of ideas grouped under headings - this is the structure of your report. Leave it for a day or two if you can. Return with fresh ideas, add points you'd forgotten, and cross out anything you don't need.

Mind mapping is a different way of planning that suits some writing better. The idea is the same: by pouring out ideas at random, you can concentrate on the content, and organise the material at leisure when the ideas are set down.

There is no special magic to a mind map. Start by putting the topic in a box in the middle of the page, then draw lines to branch out from it with your main ideas.

It is easy to add new information and to make links between the main ideas. Order and organisation will often take care of themselves.

Revision

Always read critically what you've written. If possible, leave it alone for a few days and then re-read it. Or ask someone else to read it for you. Ask: 'Is this clear, concise and persuasive?' Be prepared to revise your language and structure. You may even have to rewrite parts that don't work.

Summary

- Plan carefully before you start writing. Use an outline or a mind map so that you know exactly what you'll be writing about.
- Organise your report into sections.
- Use everyday English whenever possible.
- Avoid jargon and legalistic words, and explain any technical terms you have to use.
- Keep your sentence length down to an average of 15 to 20 words. Try to stick to one main idea in a sentence.
- Use active verbs as much as possible. Say 'we will do it' rather than 'it will be done by us'.
- Be concise.
- Imagine you are talking to your reader. Write sincerely, personally, in a style that is suitable and with the right tone of voice.
- And always check that your report is accurate, clear, concise and readable.

*****