Report writing
Academic Tip Sheet

This academic tip sheet:

- explains what a report is;
- describes the features of the most common types of reports;
- provides some guidelines for the structure and organisation of reports; and
- reviews some of the common problems associated with report writing.

What is a report?

A report is a clearly structured document in which the writer identifies and examines issues, events, or findings of an investigation. Information obtained from research or from undertaking a project is delivered in a precise, concise writing style organised under a set of headings and sub-headings, which enable the reader to find data quickly. Graphs and tables can also be used to present data in the body of the report. Rather than commenting upon, comparing or evaluating ideas, as an essay does, a report frequently offers recommendations for action based on the information it has presented.

Report Structure

The structure of a formal report may vary between institutions, organisations, disciplines, units and even between lecturers. Reports are generally organised into sections using clear headings. A guide is provided on the next page to some of the headings that are commonly used in report writing. However, it is advisable that you ask your tutor or unit coordinator for clarification on the headings you must include in your report.

Report Headings

- **Title:** The title should tell the reader what the report is about.
- **Acknowledgements:** Briefly thank people who assisted you in compiling and writing up the information in the report
- **Abstract, executive summary or synopsis**: Many readers will only read this abstract so it needs to be informative, clear and brief. It provides an accurate, summary of the content of your report. The first sentence should articulate the main aim or question explored in your report. It should also outline your approach to the research, the main theories you applied, and the most important findings or results of your research.
- **Table or list of contents:** List the main sections/headings of the report and the page number on which they first appear. You should be able to generate this automatically from a styled MSWord document after you have completed the rest of the report.
- **List of tables and illustrations:** List any illustrations, graphs, charts, maps and the page number on which they first appear.
- **Introduction:** Set the report within a context of background information to illustrate the relevance or importance of your research. State the research aims: what is it your research will explore or demonstrate? Areas that may need to be covered in the introduction include:
  - **Background:** The significance of the report and why it was commissioned.
  - **Purpose:** State clearly and succinctly.
  - **Scope:** What issues were covered, what were omitted.
  - **Research:** How the data was obtained (e.g., interviews, surveys, literature review).
  - **Definition of terms:** Specific terms or concepts that need to be clarified or defined.
- **Literature review:** Briefly summarise the most significant writings and major research findings in your field of investigation using APA format. Evaluate the major works/findings, and connect them to your own work, to show how you will draw upon or depart from the literature in your research.
- **Materials and methods:** State/define the methods you used to conduct your research (quantitative/qualitative; primary/secondary) and briefly provide a rationale for why this method was employed. Describe the conditions under which the research was conducted, number of participants, how they were selected, duration of the experiment etc. Identify any limitations in the methodology. If necessary also include any materials that were used.
- **Results:** Present the main findings of your research, using sub-headings where appropriate. You can order the results chronologically, or in any other appropriate way.
- **Discussion of results:** In this section analyse your findings at length, and provide an explanation for why those results were obtained. You may state whether or not the results confirmed your initial hypothesis, whether they were expected, and their possible significance.

  Present your findings or arguments in a logical manner according to the subject matter. You may also present options, alternatives or responses to specific situations or issues.
- **Conclusions:** Summarise the purpose of the report, the methodology or theories employed, the key points or findings of your report and the significance of those findings. Don't introduce any new points, or information or new sources. You can put recommendations here if you don't intend to have a specific section for them.
- **Recommendations:** Suggest ways in which problems identified in the report may be resolved. They should be given in a numbered list and should be feasible and realistic. Information on how they can be implemented should also be given. There should be a logical relationship between the results and the recommendations, and all recommendations should clearly spring from previously discussed material.
- **Reference List:** List alphabetically the sources referred to in the body of the report. Use APA end-text referencing for sources quoted, paraphrased or referred to in-text. Only include sources mentioned in the report.
- **Appendices:** This is for material you consider important but that interferes with the flow of your discussion; for example, data, calculations, surveys, transcripts, graphics, maps, questionnaires, pamphlets etc.) referred to in-text. Number each item starting each item on a new page. Only include items mentioned in the report.

Writing your report

The report writing process is fairly similar to that of other types of written assessment. These are best explained as a series of steps.

1. Analyse the task carefully. Things that deserve consideration include the purpose of the report, the scope of the report (what aspects are to be covered), the limits of the report (e.g., information, word count, time frame), and the target audience.
2. Make an initial plan. This step involves the generation and selection of ideas aligned to the purpose of the report (i.e., working out what's relevant and what's not) and the systematic organisation of the ideas (establishing a coherent structure).
3. Find the information, read and make notes. This step involves the research process, which typically begins by employing effective search and information management strategies. Gather and collate information in accordance with your initial plan. Amend your plan to accommodate additional information that your research might yield (but keep a strong focus on the purpose and requirements of the assessment task). Determine whether you are going to include diagrams, graphs and illustrations. Decide which information or calculations could go into an appendix.
4. Write the first draft outline with headings. It is usually best to begin with the main section of the report.
5. Revise your draft until ready for submission.

Report checklist

- **Have you determined what type of report to write?**
- **Have you determined the structure/headings of your report?**
- **Have you collected the materials/information you need to write the report?**
- **Have you drafted a timeline to complete the report on time?**
- **Have you written a draft and edited it carefully?**
- **Are all parts of the report, including appendices, completed?**
- **Have you submitted it on time and in the correct format?**
- **Have you kept a copy of your report?**

References

Lichtenberger, E. O., Mather, N., Kaufmann, N. L., & Kaufmann, A. S. (2004). *Essentials of assessment report writing.* New York: John Wiley and Sons.

Mort, S. (1992). *Professional report writing.* London: Grower Publishing Ltd.

Acknowledgements