REPORT WRITING

This study advice sheet highlights common features in written reports and makes recommendations for clear presentation and a conventional format.

What is a report?

A report is a more highly structured form of writing than an essay, and is designed so that it can be read quickly and accurately; though reports are not necessarily read from beginning to end. Structure and convention in written reports stress the process by which the information was gathered as much as the information itself. Reports should be organised for the convenience of the intended reader. Reports are written on a wide range of subjects for a wide variety of reasons.

Before writing any report you should identify the objective and the preferred conventions of structure and presentation. This is as true for reports you write at university as it is for reports written in employment.

All reports attempt to communicate findings for one reason or another, whether to inform decision makers, change public opinion or maintain a record of development. Whenever you write a report you must bear in mind why you are writing and who you are writing for. All reports have an intended reader. Put yourself in his/her position. What does he/she need to know?

Stages in report writing

The following stages are involved in writing a report:
- planning your work;
- collecting your information;
- organising and structuring your information;
- writing the first draft;
- checking and re-drafting.

Draw up an outline structure for your report and set the work within a sensible time scale for completion by the given deadline. One common structure is based on the 4 P's: position, problem, possibilities, proposal. This means you outline the current position, describe the problem, examine the range of possibilities and decide on a proposal (Hemingway, 1993). Some of the most time-consuming parts of the process are collecting and selecting your information, and checking and revising your report.

- Clarify your terms of reference – what brief are you working to?

- Decide on the main sections of your report – **what instructions have you been given**?

Examples of different types of reports

Research report: https://www.nesta.org.uk/publications/state-art-analysing-where-art-meets-technology-using-social-network-data (Access via VPN)

Industry analysis: http://www.designcouncil.org.uk/resources/report/design-economy-report

(Access via VPN)

Market research: http://academic.mintel.com/display/793761/ (Access via VPN)

Structuring your report

Check with your tutor to find out what your report should include and how it should be presented. The following elements are however common to many reports:

- **Title page**
  This should include the title of the report (which should give a precise indication of the subject matter), the author(s)'s name(s), module, and the date.

- **Acknowledgements**
  You should acknowledge any help you have received in collecting the information for the report, for example from staff in your department, support services or external companies.

- **Contents**
  You should list all the main sections of the report in sequence with the page numbers they begin on. If there are charts, diagrams or tables included in your report, these should be listed separately under a title such as 'List of Illustrations' together with the page numbers on which they appear.

- **Abstract or executive summary**
  This should be a short paragraph summarising the main contents of the report. It should include a short statement of the main task, the methods used, conclusions reached and any recommendations made. The abstract or summary should be concise, informative and independent of the report. The summary may have more than one purpose: it reminds the reader what they have read but it is also useful to busy managers or professors who may not always read the full report.

  Write this section after you have written the main body of the report.

- **Introduction**
  This should give the context and scope of the report and should include your terms of reference (what have you been asked to find out?) State your objectives clearly, define the limits of the report, outline the method of enquiry, give a brief general background to the subject of the report e.g. the company or procedure, and indicate the proposed development.

- **Methodology**
  In this section you should state how you carried out your enquiry. What form did your enquiry take? Did you carry out interviews or questionnaires, how did you collect your data? What measurements did you make? How did you choose the subjects for your interviews?

- **Results or findings**
  Present your findings in as simple a way as possible. The more complicated the information looks, the more difficult it will be to interpret. Graphs, charts and diagrams help your reader identify key results and will break the flow of written text.

- **Discussion**
This is the section where you analyse and interpret your results drawing from the information which you have collected, explaining its significance. Identify important issues and suggest explanations for your findings. Outline any problems encountered and try and present a balanced view.

- **Conclusions and recommendations**
This is the section of the report which draws together the main issues. It should be expressed clearly and should not present any new information. You may wish to list your recommendations in a separate section or include them with the conclusions.

• References

It is important that you give precise and accurate details of all the work by other authors which has been referred to within the report. References are normally listed in alphabetical order by the authors' names or in numerical order. Check your Department handbook to find out what referencing format is required by your Department.

Appendices

An appendix contains additional related information which is not essential to read but can be consulted if the reader wishes. However, the interpretation of the report should not depend on this being read. You could include details of interview questions, statistical data, a glossary of terms, or other such information.

Presentation

Your report should be easy to read. **What are the requirements for your module?**
- Paragraphs should be short and concise. They should be spaced apart.
- Avoid rambling by using short sentences.
- Avoid using unnecessary jargon and unexplained abbreviations.
- List your standard measurements, units and technical terminology in a glossary at the end.
- Headings should be clear – highlighted in bold or underlined.
- Label graphs, pictures or drawings as 'Figures', e.g. Figure 1, Figure 2 etc.
- Tables of information should be labelled separately, e.g. Table 1, Table 2 etc.

Style of writing

Keep it simple. Avoid sentences that are too long and eliminate unnecessary jargon. Your tutor will be able to advise whether the report should be written in the 'active' or 'passive' voice.

The active voice reads as follows: *'I recommend ...'*
The passive voice reads: *'It is recommended that ...'*

The active voice allows you to write short, punchy sentences. The passive appears more formal and considered and is more suitable for academic writing. Avoid mixing the two voices.
In which voice will you be expected to write?

Layout

Most reports have a progressive numbering system. The main sections are given single numbers - 1, 2, 3 and so on.
Subsections are given a decimal number- 1.1, 1.2, 1.3 etc.
Subsections can be further divided- 1.1.1, 1.1.2, 1.1.3, 1.2.1, 1.2.2 etc.

Redrafting and checking

Once you have written the first draft of your report you will need to check it through. It is probably sensible to leave it on your desk for a day or so if you have the time. This will make a clear break from the intensive writing period, allowing you to view your work more objectively. Assess your work by re-reading particularly focusing on:
- structure,
- content,
- style.

Report writing checklist

1. Title page
Does this include the:
- title?
- author(s)'s name(s)?
- module details?

2. Acknowledgements
Have you acknowledged all sources of help?

3. Contents
Have you listed all the main sections in sequence?
Have you included a list of illustrations?

4. Abstract or summary
Does this state the:
- main task?
- methods used?
- conclusions reached?
- recommendations made?

5. Introduction
Does this include:
- your terms of reference?
- the limits of the report?
- an outline of the method?
- a brief background to the subject matter?

6. Methodology
Does this include:
- the form your enquiry took?
- the way you collected your data?

7. Results and findings
Are your diagrams clear and simple?
Are they clearly labelled?
Do they relate closely to the text?

8. Discussion
Have you identified key issues?
Have you suggested explanations for your findings?
Have you outlined any problems encountered?
Have you presented a balanced view?

9. Conclusions and recommendations
Have you drawn together all of your main ideas?
Have you avoided including any new information?
Are your recommendations clear and concise?

10. References
Have you listed all references?
Have you included all the necessary information for locating each reference?
Are your references accurate and consistent?

11. Appendices
Have you only included supporting information?
Does the reader need to read these sections?

12. Writing style

Have you used clear and concise language?
Are your sentences short and jargon free?
Are your paragraphs tightly focused?
Have you used the active or the passive voice?

Illustrations checklist

All illustrations should be carefully presented to help convey your information:
- ☐ Are all your illustrations clearly labelled?
- ☐ Do they all have titles?
- ☐ Is the link between the text and diagram clear?
- ☐ Are the headings precise?
- ☐ Are the axes of graphs clearly labelled?
- ☐ Can tables be easily interpreted?
- ☐ Have you acknowledged all sources and obtained permission to reproduce copyright images?
- ☐ Have you numbered your illustrations and listed them in the Contents section?