

# REPORT WRITING

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## Characteristics of an effective report

A report is a structured written presentation directed to interested readers in response to some specific purpose, aim or request. There are many varieties of reports, but generally their function is to give an account of something, to answer a question, or to offer a solution to a problem.

An effective report is:

- Appropriate to its purpose and audience
- Accurate
- Logical
- Clear and concise
- Well organised with clear section headings.

## Report structure

One important advantage that a report has over other written communication is that it follows a standardised format. This enables readers to find and focus on specific parts of information. Most reports are modelled on the following structure (modified where necessary).

1. Transmittal document
2. Title page
3. Table of contents
4. Abstract/Executive Summary
5. Introduction
6. Discussion
7. Conclusions
8. Recommendations
9. Bibliography.

## Report writing procedure stage 1: Planning

Define the purpose:

- Read the brief carefully
- Identify key words
- Make sure you know what's really being asked

Define the audience:

- Determine your audience's level of understanding
- Determine what your audience needs to know.

Establish parameters:

- Determine the scope and level of detail required
- Determine the length of the report and what can be covered in that length.

Gather information:

- Make sure the information you gather is relevant, contemporary and factually correct
- Make sure that you transcribe facts and figures correctly.

## **Report writing procedure stage 2: Writing**

Write the report in three steps:

1. Write the body
2. Write the abstract/executive summary
3. Write the supplementary material

Advice on each stage is provided below.

### **Step 1: Write the body**

There are four components of the body of the report: the introduction, the discussion, the conclusion and the recommendations.

#### **Introduction**

The introduction leads into the main subject matter by giving the necessary background of the report, its aims, premises, scope, limitations, approach intended audience, possible benefits and any instructions that may be useful for the reader. If specialist terms are used in the report, define them clearly. It puts the discussion in perspective, explains why the report is necessary and gives background information on the subject matter.

#### **Discussion**

The discussion is the main body of the report. Use headings and sub-headings. It describes, analyses, interprets and evaluates the procedures, data, findings, relationships, visual material, methodology and results in the report. This material should be presented in an order that leads logically towards the conclusions and recommendations. In writing the discussion section of the body, you should:

- Pitch at appropriate level
- Organise material logically
- Use clear, concise language
- Give concrete examples.

#### **Conclusion**

Conclusions are drawn from evidence, analysis, interpretation and evaluation presented in the discussion. No new material should be introduced; the conclusions should follow logically from the Discussion. The Conclusion section should give:

- Conclusions
- Key points
- Main findings.

## **Recommendation**

The Recommendation section (when used - not all reports give recommendations) should present your informed opinions, suggestions, possible actions to be taken, applications and recommendations arising from a rational consideration of the discussion and conclusions.

- Be definite
- Be perceptive
- Be imaginative
- Be rational.

## **Step 2: Write the abstract/executive summary**

Once the body of the report is written, write the abstract. The abstract (also known as the Executive Summary) is a concise summary presentation of the essential elements of the report, from the introduction through to and including the recommendations. It should be independent (can be read on its own), comprehensive (covers all the main points), clear and concise. As a general rule it should be short, only 10-15% of the length of the report, and should be written in full sentences and paragraphs. It should include a summary of the following:

- Purpose
- Scope
- Achievements
- Main points
- Conclusions
- Recommendations.

## **Step 3: Write the supplementary material**

### **Transmittal document**

The transmittal document is not part of the report, but accompanies the report. In letter, memo, or minute form, it personalises the report for a specific reader and calls attention to those items or sections in the report which are of particular interest to that person.

### **Title page**

The title page identifies the report with the following information:

- Title
- Author's name, position and qualifications
- Authority for report
- Place of origin
- Date.

### **Table of contents**

The table of contents shows the section titles and major headings listed in order of appearance and indicates page locations. Standard page numbering begins with the Introduction. The Abstract or Executive Summary is usually numbered with lower case Roman numerals (i, ii, iii, iv, etc.)

### **Bibliography**

The bibliography lists all publications either cited or referred to in preparing the report. Use the Referencing System recommended by your School.

## Report writing procedure stage 3: Formatting, revising and proof-reading

Apply the following report checklist:

- Have you fulfilled the purpose of the report?
- Is the report written at a level appropriate to its audience?
- Are the facts correct?
- Is it comprehensive?
- Is all the included information relevant?
- Are the layout and presentation well thought out?
- Is the style clear, concise and professional?
- Does the abstract summarise?
- Does the introduction adequately introduce the discussion?
- Is the discussion organised logically?
- Does the conclusions section interpret, analyse and and evaluate?
- Are the recommendations reasonable?
- Does the table of contents correspond with the actual contents? Are page numbers correct?
- Have you acknowledged all sources of information through correct referencing?
- Have you checked spelling, grammar and punctuation?
- Have you carefully proof-read the final draft?