

REPORT WRITING

The material included in this short guide has been gathered and adapted from the following publications:

A Handbook of Writing for Engineers by Joan van Emden
Effective Business Reports by R.W. Poe
How to Write and Present Technical Information by C.H. Sides
Reading, Writing and Reasoning by Gavin Fairbairn and Christopher Winch
Report Writing by Joan van Emden and Jennifer Easteal
The Mature Student's Guide to Writing by Jean Rose
Writing Technical Reports by Bruce M. Cooper

Part 1 of the guide considers the differences between reports and essays, takes you through the main steps in the report writing process and looks at a sample report structure. Part 2 examines issues of style and clarity and provides some basic tips for the use of graphics.

The guidelines are intended to provide useful general advice for writing reports both as part of an academic course and for work purposes. It is important to also take account of any specific "house rules" that might apply to your particular course of study or in your work situation.

Other useful guides for students whose first language is not English are:

Build your Business Grammar by Tim Bower
Build your Business Vocabulary by John Flower

PART 1**HOW DOES A REPORT DIFFER FROM AN ESSAY?**

- Written for specific purpose
- Targeted at specific audience
- Systematic presentation of facts
- Focus on facts, not personal view
- Highly structured format to lead reader quickly to main themes and findings
- Use of headings, sub headings, numbering and bullet points
- Use of graphics to present information

REPORT WRITING STAGES**Step 1 - Clarify your purpose**

- Why are you writing the report?
- To inform? Explain? Evaluate? Advise? Recommend?
- What do you hope to achieve?

Clarification of procedures? Change in practice? Change in attitude? Action of some other sort?

- Who will read it?

Who is your main reader?

What does he already know about the subject?

What are his expectations?

What are his attitudes?

What does he want to know?

Is he likely to readily accept your ideas?

- How will the report be used?

Step 2 - Collect and sift material

- Jot down ideas relevant to your purpose in note form
- Make an action plan – what to do and in what order
- Gather information:

Examination of documents; visits; interviews; observation etc.

- Note information and sources as you find them
- Sift findings for relative importance and relevance

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Step 3 - Organise the material

- Follow recommended structure for your subject
- Group into sections and subsections
- Plan logical order appropriate to subject:
 - from most important findings to least important
 - chronological
 - geographical
 - from current position detail progressively what led to it
- Keep sections watertight
- Not too much information in each section

Step 4 - Draft and edit/redraft

- Present facts accurately, clearly and concisely in main body
- Evaluate facts in conclusion
- Use impersonal, objective style
- Use formal language.
- Use clear, concise language
- Choose words that convey a precise and objective meaning
- Use simple, straightforward sentence construction and words
- Use conjunctions and linking phrases to show connection between ideas
- Avoid bossy or condescending tone
- Put aside for a day or two then edit for content and style

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Step 5 - Presentation of final draft

- Check house style of layout
- Use clear headings and subheadings
- Rank headings clearly – use indentations
- Use clear numbering for sections, subsections and paragraphs
- Use appendices for detailed findings
- Use tables and graphs if appropriate
- Check grammar, punctuation and spelling

SAMPLE REPORT STRUCTURE:

This structure, with its clear ranking of headings and indentations, would be suitable for a long, detailed report. A short report may not require such a formal structure.

1.0. TITLE PAGE

2.0. SUMMARY

Succinct overview including objectives, key conclusions, recommendations and implications (some readers may stop here)

3.0. CONTENTS

Include: section headings, subsections, illustrations, appendices etc., with page numbers

4.0. TERMS OF REFERENCE

Include: background, purpose and aims, who asked for it, scope of research, constraints, special considerations

5.0. MAIN BODY– procedure/findings and analysis

5.1. First Main Section

5.2. Second Main Section

5.2.1 First subsection

5.2.2 Second subsection etc.

6.0. CONCLUSIONS

Link back to Terms of Reference and base clearly on findings.

7.0. RECOMMENDATIONS

8.0. APPENDICES

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REPORT EDITING CHECKLIST

- Purpose and aims clear?
- Readers' needs taken into account?
- Main points included?
- Points supported by evidence?
- All information relevant to purpose?
- Balance between sections O.K.?
- Any repetition?
- Order logical?
- Ideas follow through?
- Headings and numbering clear?
- Information presented clearly?
- Do figures add up?
- Conclusions and recommendations clearly linked to purpose and based on findings?
- Good use of graphics?
- Language clear and easy to understand?
- Style formal?
- Tone suited to purpose?
- Any unnecessary words/phrases?
- Grammar/punctuation correct?
- Spelling O.K?

PART 2**USE AN OBJECTIVE, IMPERSONAL STYLE:**

Passive used traditionally to show unbiased presentation of facts:

“It will be found that...” not “You will find that...”

“It is recommended...” not “I recommend...”

“Difficulties were encountered” not “We encountered difficulties”

But:

Can sound contrived and stuffy and seem to hide personal responsibility

Some personal interpretation of facts likely in conclusions and recommendations

Modern practice often allows use of “I”, “We”, “You”

Be guided by “house” practice

Be guided by reader, purpose and “ownership” of report

Avoid using terms that suggest bias: e.g. “bureaucrats”, “fat cats”, “elitist”, “spurious”

Active or passive?

- Depends where the focus/emphasis is:
 - Fact or action the main focus? – Use the passive.
 - e.g. Penicillin was discovered by Sir Alexander Fleming
An observer was sent
 - Want to emphasise the “doer”? - Use the active
 - e.g. Sir Alexander Fleming discovered penicillin.
Management sent an observer
- Active is more direct and clear
- Passive uses more words – more room for grammatical errors
- Overuse of passive can make heavy reading
- Avoid cumbersome passive expressions by just stating opinion directly

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e.g. “This system needs to be changed” not “It is believed that this system needs to be changed”

EXPRESS IDEAS CLEARLY

Keep sentence structure simple and avoid over-long sentences:

The reports indicated by the ticks will be issued from the new library, any not in it being immediately transferred from the old library, and all of these, together with a copy of the list, will be taken back to the member of staff.

Identify the main idea and give it a separate sentence:

The reports marked with ticks will be issued from the new library. Any reports not in the new library will be transferred from the old library. All of these, together with a copy of the list, will be taken back to the member of staff.

N.B. Vary sentence length for effect – a short sentence after a string of longer ones can have greater impact.

Place action in verbs, not nouns

Compare: “The Department collects payments and notifies...”
“The function of the Department is the collection and notification...”

Choose word order for emphasis:

Compare these:

- A. Although the machine was badly damaged, it could be repaired.
The machine was badly damaged, although it could be repaired.
- B. The machine was overhauled, after which it worked at full capacity.
The machine worked at full capacity after it was overhauled.

Watch your grammar!

What’s wrong with these sentences? Amended versions in italics.

Working with the lathe, the table had a smooth finish.
(After it had been worked on with a lathe, the table had a smooth finish)

Rusting badly though it was, Jim’s brain told him that he would buy the car.
(Jim’s brain told him that he would buy the car, even though it was rusting badly)

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Used for long periods without ventilation, overheating can cause damage to the instrument.

(If the instrument is used for long periods without ventilation, overheating can cause damage to it.)

The run time checks indicate at what point of the process the computer is currently at. *(Delete the second "at")*

The failure of the systems which we have installed recently have led to the current financial crisis.

(The failure ... has led to ...)

Each of the systems which we have installed have created initial problems.

(Each of the systems ... has created ...)

Manuals are mainly held in the print room, but some by individuals which are often unique.

(Manuals are mainly held in the print room, but some, which are often unique, are held by individuals)

Use plain English:

Before: The problem was exacerbated by the existence of unclear perceptions by those engineers involved in the project of who the client really was.

After: The engineers involved in the project were unsure of the client's identity. This made the problem worse.

Before: It is desired to draw attention to the necessity that the regulations governing procedures established to ensure safety in the event of fire should be observed by all residents.

After: Residents should obey the fire drill regulations.

Before: A well-conceived organisation constitutes a fundamental component of efficacious office management.

After: Good office management can come about only if there is the right kind of organisation.

Use clear, precise language:

Before: At present no fax is logged, they used to be but they got too busy to continue the system.

After: Owing to pressure of work, faxes are no longer logged.

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Avoid “business-ese”:

Before: Profit-wise, the company would be in a much better position if an attempt were made to maximise the utilization of mechanical equipment in order to optimise on the greatest economies.

After: The company will earn a bigger profit if mechanical equipment is used whenever possible to keep costs down.

Avoid abstract words and phrases:

The track was in a wet condition
(i.e. The track was wet)

The distribution of demand is of a widespread nature (i.e. The distribution of demand is widespread)

Avoid over-using imprecise words:

Appreciable, case, condition, certain, consideration, factor, facilities, overall, practically, real, relatively, situation, tendency

Avoid “filler” phrases:

According as to whether	A certain amount of
A high degree of	As far as --- is concerned
For the reason that	At the present time
From the --- point of view	Having a value of
Having regard to	In a number of cases
In connection with	In relation to
In spite of the fact that	In the case of
In the event of	In the majority of instances
Owing to the fact that	Provides a means by which
Referred to as	With a view to

Use simple prepositions instead!

USE OF GRAPHICS - TIPS

Graphics (e.g. table, chart, graph, diagram) are useful for presenting numerical information.

Chosen graphic should :

- be appropriate to the information
(e.g. line graph to show patterns/trends; bar chart to show comparative data for given time period; pie chart to show relationship of parts to whole)

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- add something to the text, not just duplicate (interpret significant figures in the text)
- be simple, uncluttered and easy to read
- be to a sensible scale so information can be easily extracted
- have title, number and clear labelling
- be sensibly placed on the page
 - as close to the relevant text as possible
 - not interrupt the flow of reading
- be consistent with other graphics in size, lettering, shading, colouring and positioning