University of Worcester

Writing reports

Reports are written on a wide range of subjects for a wide variety of reasons.

Reports are a highly structured form of writing, often following conventions clearly laid down to produce a common format. Structure and convention in written reports stress the process by which the information was gathered as much as the information itself.

Before writing any report you should identify 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 a reader. Why are they reading?

This study advice sheet highlights common features in written reports and makes recommendations for clear presentation and adherence to convention.

Contents

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.

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?

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 common to many reports:

- Title page
- Acknowledgements
- Contents
- Abstract or summary
- Introduction
- Methodology
- Results or findings
- Discussion
- Conclusion and recommendations
- References
- Appendices

Sections in detail

Title page

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

Acknowledgements

You should acknowledge any help you have received in collecting the information for the report, for example 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 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 to be made. The abstract or summary should be concise, informative and independent of the 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 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 to identify key results and break the flow of written text.

Discussion

This is the section where you can analyse and interpret your results drawing from the information that 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 details of all the work by other authors which has been referred to within the report. References are usually listed in alphabetical order of the authors' names but you need to check with the standard referencing style used by your subject.

Make sure that your references are accurate and follow the agreed referencing style.

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.

Writing for others

Illustration 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 the diagram clear?

- Are the headings precise?

- Are the axes of graphs clearly labelled?

- Can tables be easily interpreted?

- Have you abided by copyright laws when including illustrations/tables from published documents?

- Have you numbered your illustrations and listed them in the contents section?

Style of writing

The message here is to 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.

Find out in which voice you will be expected to write.

Layout

Most reports have a progressive numbering system. The most common system is the decimal notation system:
The main sections are given single arabic numbers - 1, 2, 3 and so on.
Subsections are given a decimal number - 1.1, 1.2, 1.3 and so on.
Sub-sections can be further divided into - 1.11, 1.12, 1.13 and so on.

Presentation

Your report should be easy to read.
Usually your department will ask for it to be word-processed.
What are the requirements for your department or module?

- Leave wide margins for binding and feedback comments from your tutor.
- Avoid rambling by using short sentences.
- Paragraphs should be short and concise.
- 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.

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

Use the checklist overleaf to check through your report before submitting it.

Further information

This Study Advice Sheet has been produced by Student Services at UW.

We support student learning across the University through the publication of materials such as these.

Other study advice sheets that you may find useful include:

Essay writing

Learning at university

Learning journals

Making oral presentations

Minimising stress

Organising yourself

Reading efficiently

Revision and exam skills

Study at a distance

Taking notes

Using feedback to improve your work

What does the question mean?

Working in groups

All study advice sheets are available to view and download on the following website:

www.worcester.ac.uk/studyskills

or you can follow the links from your SOLE page.

You may also find it useful to check out the **'Moving On'** pack, accessible from the link on your SOLE page.

'Moving On' is a study skills package specifically designed to help you prepare for Higher Education & to become a successful student.

Contact: studyskills@worc.ac.uk

Report Writing Checklist

- **Title page**

Does this include the: Title?
                        Author's name?
                        Module/course details?

- **Acknowledgements**

Have you acknowledged all sources of help?

- **Contents**

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

- **Abstract or summary**

Does this state: The main task?
                   The methods used?
                   The conclusions reached?
                   The recommendations made?

- **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?

- **Methodology**

Does this include: The form your enquiry took?
                     The way you collected your data?

- **Reports and findings**

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

- **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?

- **Conclusions and recommendations**

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

- **References**

Have you listed all references alphabetically?
Have you included all the necessary information for locating each reference?
Are your references accurate?

- **Appendices**

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

- **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?