# Reports

## The purpose of a report

A report is a practical document that describes, details or analyses something so that the reader can make decisions or take specific action concerning it. A report can be written about anything; a business issue, a recent event, a piece of research; however, it is likely to be one or more of the following in character:

**Informative**Defining or establishing the facts surrounding a current situation

**Explanatory**Exploring and explaining a situation and suggesting a range of possible actions

**Persuasive**Investigating a problem and recommending a specific course of action

## Best practice approach

Before embarking on a report assignment, you should:

* Read the journals for your subject. Note the way they structure arguments, the way they use evidence and the layout and style of their articles.
* Think about what a report does – some reports, for example, allow readers to judge different items against disclosed criteria. The readers can then decide what to do, depending on their own criteria for action.
* Clarify your aims before you start – Is your report factual (expected to establish a current situation)? Instructional (expected to suggest a range of options)? Persuasive (expected to investigate a problem and suggest a range of options for further action)?
* Consider your reader. What do I want my reader to think? What do I want my reader to do? What will I need to tell my reader to get them there? In what order?

## Why write a report?

* If your report is factual, you will be gathering information to explain or define a situation.
* If your report is instructional, you will be gathering information to explain a problem and offer a range of solutions
* If your report is persuasive, you will be gathering the information to explain a problem and recommend a solution.

## The difference between reports and essays

As a part of the assessment for your course, you may be required to write both reports and essays; this table highlights the main differences between the two:

|  | **Report** | **Essay** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Purpose** | - To resolve a problem - To improve a situation - To understand a phenomenon - It usually involves defining an issue,  investigating, presenting and analysing  information to develop a set of recommendations (actions) | - To research and answer a question - To establish or test a proposition |
| **Title** | **Statement**e.g.: ‘A cost-benefit analysis of workplace training programmes in Zambia’ | **Question** e.g.: ‘Is cost-benefit analysis an effective approach for decision-making in developing countries?’ |
| **Approach** | - A case study - An investigation - An experiment | A discussion exploring a proposition and making an argument for or/and against an idea |
| **Format** | May include bullet points as well as paragraphs | Series of paragraphs |
| **Writing Style** | Direct, academic | Discursive, academic |
| **Typical Structure** | - Abstract - Introduction - Aims - Method - Results - Discussion - Conclusion… etc. | - Introduction - Main body (progressive order) - Conclusion |

## Report structure and tips

**Structure:** Reports are formal documents which can include headings, sub-headings, numbered sections, bullet point text, and graphics such as flow charts, diagrams or graphs. All of these devices may be used to help the reader navigate the report and understand its content. A report is likely to include some or all of these elements, typically ordered as follows:

**Title page:**clearly identifying the subject of the report and the author

**Acknowledgements:**naming third parties who have helped create the document

**Executive summary:** an abbreviated, stand-alone overview of the report. Similar to the abstract of a journal article

**Contents page:**allowing the reader to find their way quickly to sections of interest. This may or may not also include a table of figures or tables

**Introduction:**outlining the main context, aims and objectives of the report

**Background information:**anything essential to a full understanding of the report

**Methodology:**describing how the report’s objectives were met or how the research was conducted

**Findings:** what the report found

**Analysis:** what these findings mean; their relevance and importance

**Conclusion:** summarising the key things the report learned or established

**Recommendations:**suggestions for action based on the report’s findings

**Bibliography:** a full list of sourcesused to compile the report

**Appendices:** containing supplementary information referred to in the report

**Glossary:**definitions of technical terms used in the report

## Common requirements

Different types of report – from technical reports to business reports - can vary widely in length, format and function. However, with every report:

**Objectives:** should be clearly defined  
**Structure:** should be logical and easy to navigate  
**Writing:** should be clear, succinct, and easy to understand  
**Evidence:** should support all conclusions made

## Report writing tips

* Often, reports are written about a collaborative project. If this is the case, make sure you know who is doing what and how the report will come together, including timeframes. Make sure to include time to share the report with the rest of the team before it is ‘published’, and that any requirements from external stakeholders or project partners are clearly outlined and factored in
* Before you start writing, clarify the aims, structure and content of your report
* Write in the 3rd person (This report will show…) to emphasise your objectivity, but do check departmental style as your discipline could have a more relaxed approach
* Use clear, formal language, avoiding slang, jargon and contractions such as ‘don’t’ or ‘can’t’.
* Write sections as and when able, not necessarily in order of appearance (you can reorder it in the appropriate format once all sections have been completed).
* Have a system of version control (numbered drafts)
* Write freely, whilst allowing time for editing and proof-reading later
* Keep the report’s title in mind, and stay focussed on fulfilling its objectives
* Each finding should have a conclusion; each leading to a recommendation

## Report writing in the sciences (useful resources)

[Technical writing conventions](https://www.student.unsw.edu.au/technical-writing-conventions)

This resource offers an introduction to writing in an engineering or scientific context, offering an outline of some of the most common conventions in **technical writing**.

[Support for writing lab reports](http://www.student.unsw.edu.au/support-writing-laboratory-reports)

This resource offers an introduction to structuring and writing both simple and extended **lab reports**.

[Writing for publication in the biosciences](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/page/journal/13652958/homepage/forauthors.html#preparingsubmissions)

This resource presents guidelines on getting published in **Molecular Microbiology**.

If you need help or advice with any issue raised in this study guide, please book an appointment with the Skills for Academic Success team (SAS).

Scan the QR code to book appointments, view our events calendar, watch skills videos and more…

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