Report writing

Executive Summary

Report writing, or writing in report format, is an essential skill for managers and any person who is writing in a business environment.

A report should inform the reader of what they need to know in a clear, concise and succinct manner. Let’s now look at some general guidelines for writing in report format. In so doing we will look at the way a report differs from an essay.

Both a report and an essay are similar in that they convey information to a reader. They are also similar in that they both need:

- a formal style of writing;
- an introduction, body and conclusion;
- analytical thinking; and
- careful proof reading and professional presentation.

A report differs from an essay in that a report:

- presents information, not an argument;
- is meant to be scanned and consumed quickly by the reader,
- uses numbered headings and sub-headings;
- uses short, concise paragraphs and bullet points where applicable;
- uses graphics wherever possible (ie tables, graphs, illustrations);
- may need an executive summary; and
- is often followed by recommendations and/or appendices.

A report should generally include the following sections:

- letter of introduction;
- title page*;
- table of contents*;
- list of abbreviations and/or glossary;
- executive summary*;
- introduction*;
- body*;
- conclusion*;
- recommendations;
- bibliography*; and
- appendices where they add value to the information in the body.

(Sections marked with an asterisk (*) are essential. Others are optional depending on the type, length and purpose of the report.)
Presentation and style are important. First impressions count, so consider these simple tips:

- use plenty of white space;
- ensure the separate parts of your report stand out clearly;
- use headings and sub-headings;
- allow generous spacing between the elements of your report;
- use bullet points/numbers/letters to articulate these elements;
- number each page;
- use footers on each page to identify the report;
- use consistent and appropriate formatting; and
- use formal language.

Avoid these:

- the inclusion of careless, unfounded, inaccurate or conflicting data;
- the inclusion of outdated or irrelevant data (commonly called padding);
- unsupported opinions;
- unsupported conclusions and recommendations;
- unprofessional presentation; and
- an emphasis on appearance rather than content.

What is report writing?

**Introduction**

Report writing, or the ability to write in report format, is an essential skill for managers in every field of business, eg accountants, teachers, graphic designers, engineers, IT analysts etc. That's one of the reasons we ask you to write reports in your assessment activities.

A report aims to inform, as clearly and succinctly as possible. It should be easy to read and professional and businesslike in its presentation.

Exactly what you include in your report and how you present it will vary according to the subject of the report and the purpose for which it is being written. We will now give you some general guidelines, but remember each report is different.

**Reports and essays – what's the difference?**

A common problem is that those of us who are asked to write and present a report will often transfer what we have learnt about essay writing to report writing. While the format of a report and an essay are different they both require:

- a formal style of writing;
- an introduction, body and conclusion;
- analytical thinking; and
- careful proof reading and professional presentation.
There are, however essential differences between the two:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A report</th>
<th>An essay</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is meant to be scanned quickly by the reader</td>
<td>Presents an argument in detail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses numbered headings and sub headings</td>
<td>Uses minimal headings and sub headings (if any)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May not need references and bibliography/</td>
<td>Always needs references and bibliography/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reference list</td>
<td>reference list</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses short, concise paragraphs and bullet</td>
<td>Links ideas into cohesive paragraphs, rather than</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>points where applicable</td>
<td>breaking them down into a list of bullet points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses graphics wherever possible (tables,</td>
<td>Rarely uses graphics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>graphs, illustrations)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May need an executive summary</td>
<td>Will only need a summary if it is very long, or if</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>you are asked to specifically include one.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May be followed by recommendations and/or</td>
<td>Seldom has recommendations or appendices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>appendices</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Report structure**

Listed below is a generic structure for a report. Using this structure will give the report the correct level of formality and ensure that all important facets are included. Remember this is a generic structure. The actual structure of a specific report will be determined according to the subject of the report and the purpose for which it is being written.

A report should generally include the following sections:

- letter of introduction;
- title page*;
- table of contents*;
- list of abbreviations and/or glossary;
- executive summary*;
- introduction*;
- body*;
- conclusion*;
- recommendations;
- bibliography*; and
- appendices where they add value to the information in the body.

*(Sections marked with an asterisk (*) are essential. Others are optional depending on the type, length and purpose of the report.)*
Letter of introduction (only if considered appropriate)

This is a letter to the person who commissioned the report, in which the report is effectively handed over by the report writer. The letter should include:

- a salutation (eg Dear Mr Smith);
- the purpose of the letter (eg “I attach the required report on bee keeping which was commissioned by your organisation”);
- the main finding of the report;
- any important considerations;
- an acknowledgement of any significant assistance; and
- an expression of pleasure or gratitude(eg “Thank you for giving us the opportunity to develop this report.”).

Title page

This must contain:

- the report title which clearly states the purpose of the report;
- full details of the person(s) for whom the report was prepared;
- full details of the person(s) who prepared the report; and
- the date of the presentation of the report.

Table of contents (usually only if the report is longer than, say, 10 pages)

This is a list of the headings and appendices of the report. Depending on the complexity and length of the report, you could list tables, figures and appendices separately.

Abbreviations and/or glossary

If necessary, you should provide an alphabetical list of the abbreviations you have used in the report, especially if they may not be familiar to the readers of the report.

If you have used a lot of technical terms, you should also provide a glossary (an alphabetical list of the terms, with brief explanations of their meanings).

Acknowledgements (if appropriate)

This is a short paragraph thanking any person or organisation which gave you help in collecting data or preparing the report.

Summary or Executive summary (this is written once the report is completed)

A summary is quite different to an introduction. It is a summary of the report, in which you include a sentence or a list of short points summarising what is in each section of the report. For example, you may include the:

- context of the report;
- purpose of the report;
- major findings;
- conclusions; and
- main recommendations.
Introduction

- provide sufficient background information to provide a context for the report;
- clearly state the purpose of the report; and
- clarify key terms and indicate the scope of the report (ie what the report will cover).

Body

The content of the body depends on the purpose of the report, and whether it is a report based on primary and/or secondary research.

A report based on primary research (based on your own observations and research) includes:

- a literature review setting out what other people have written about the topic. This review should lead the report into addressing the research question;
- method (summarises what you did and why) (use the past tense);
- findings or results (describe what you discovered etc in your observations and experiences) (use the past tense); and
- discussion (discusses and explains your findings and relates them to previous research) (use the present tense).

A report based on secondary research (based on reading what others have researched) would include:

- Information organised under appropriate topics with sub-headings. It is unlikely that your report will discuss each source separately. You need to coordinate material from different sources under topic headings.
- Analysis/discussion of the sources you are reporting.

Conclusion

Sum up the main points of the report. The conclusion should clearly relate to the objectives of the report. No new information should be included here. The conclusion should also include recommendations (if any). These are suggestions for future action. They must be logically derived from information contained in the body of the report.

Bibliography

You will need to refer to OTEN's OLS site regarding bibliography/reference list/referencing.

Appendices

An appendix contains material which is too detailed, technical, or complex to include in the body of the report (eg copies of surveys and interview questions; detailed research findings; and graphs, tables etc) but which is referred to in the report. Appendices are clearly labelled and found at the very end of the report.
Presentation of the report

The content and structure of your report is important, as is presentation and style. Remember first impressions count, so consider these simple tips to ensure your report is reader-friendly:

- use plenty of white space;
- ensure that the separate parts of your report stand out clearly;
- use subheadings;
- allow generous spacing between the different elements of your report;
- use bullet points/numbers/letters to articulate these elements;
- use tables and figures (graphs, illustrations, maps etc) for clarification. Label them clearly and cite the source. These graphics should relate to the text of your report (e.g., figure 1 shows that the population of New Philadelphia has decreased dramatically since 1870, or the population of New Philadelphia has decreased dramatically since 1870 – see figure 1);
- number each page (a neat header and/or footer makes your work look more professional);
- use consistent and appropriate formatting; and
- use formal language. It would be worth having a look at the language which is used in other, similar reports to check out useful expressions and terms.

Common problems

Some common problems with report writing that you should take care to avoid are:

- the inclusion of inaccurate, or conflicting information;
- the inclusion of outdated, or irrelevant data;
- presenting facts and opinions which are not separated;
- provision of unsupported conclusions and recommendations;
- careless presentation and proof reading;
- too much emphasis on appearance and not enough attention to solid content.