Report Writing: An introductory guide

Reports are documents used to convey information in a relevant format. This guide will provide some hints and tips about what reports are, how they differ from essays and how best to structure them to create professional looking documents.

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Report Writing

An introductory guide

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Summary

Reports are documents used to convey information in a relevant format. This guide will provide some hints and tips about what reports are, how they differ from essays and how best to structure them to create professional looking documents.

Disclaimer

Please Note: This guide has been written in the style of a report. However, there are many ways to layout a report. Check your module guide for individual tutor requirements.

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Figures and Tables

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Introduction

Reports are used in many professions including health, medical, science, government, business, and the police. As they are used to provide key information, they are considered to be a highly effective communication tool. But they need careful planning to create maximum impact. This guide will outline some of the formatting and style issues to consider.

1. Differences and Purpose

1.1 The main difference from essays is that reports can make use of the following to enhance their look and feel:

- ❖ labelled sections
- ❖ headings and subheadings
- ❖ bullet points or short paragraphs
- ❖ images, tables and diagrams

1.2 Good report writing is a key employability skill. Reports are used to provide information, make recommendations, feedback on surveys or outline strategy. Therefore, a good report should be accessible, readable and attractive.

2. Importance of the Brief

2.1 Reports are usually the result of a specific brief or assignment. The format of the report therefore needs to reflect what your tutor is asking for.

2.2 Read the brief carefully and if need be ask your tutor which layout they wish to see. They may leave that decision up to you as it can depend on your findings.

Here are some basics to get you started:

3. Format or Layout

3.1 Below are some suggested sections for a scientific or laboratory report and a business or policing report. The key is to be flexible so only include those sections relevant to the brief. Therefore, use these suggestions as guidelines and add to, change or omit sections as needed.
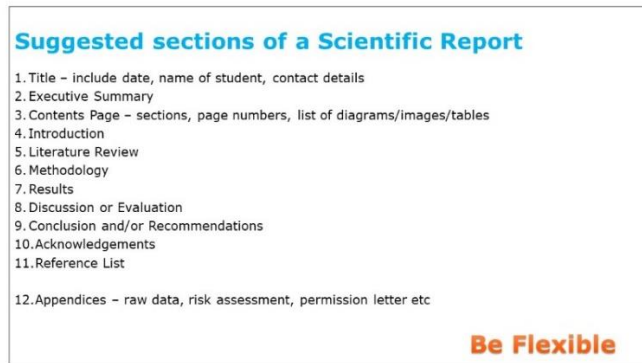
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Suggested sections of a Scientific Report

1. Title – include date, name of student, contact details
2. Executive Summary
3. Contents Page – sections, page numbers, list of diagrams/images/tables
4. Introduction
5. Literature Review
6. Methodology
7. Results
8. Discussion or Evaluation
9. Conclusion and/or Recommendations
10. Acknowledgements
11. Reference List

12. Appendices – raw data, risk assessment, permission letter etc

Be Flexible

Figure 1: Suggested sections for a scientific report

Suggested sections of a Business / Policing Report

1. Title – include date, name of student, contact details
2. Executive Summary
3. Contents Page – sections with page numbers, list of diagrams/images/tables
4. Introduction

5. Main Part – structured according to information and findings

6. Conclusion and/or Recommendations
7. Acknowledgements
8. Reference List

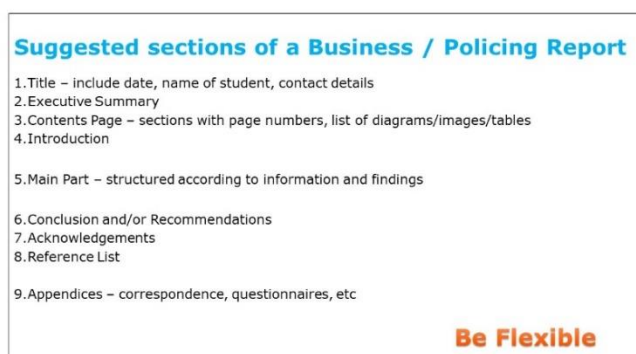9. Appendices – correspondence, questionnaires, etc

Be Flexible

Figure 2: Suggested sections for a business or policing report

3.2 Readers of reports will often 'dip' into a report initially to get the overall messges. Which sections might they read first? Most likely: Executive Summary, Conclusion, and Recommendations

3.3 Microsoft applications provide formatting tools such as cover pages, page numbering, headers and footers etc. to enhance the look and feel of the report.

4. Writing skills

4.1 You still need to use formal well-written text. However, unlike essays, the text can be divided up effectively into short sub-sections or bullet or numbered points to ensure your key messages are accessible.

4.2 You still need to make use of well-structured sentences and paragraphs and use signposting to aid the flow of your text. Check out our general writing tips.

5. Visual media to illustrate your reports

5.1 Enhance the impact of your report by including images, figures or illustrations, diagrams, tables, infographics etc. A few golden rules though:

1. They must all be relevant and have a purpose
2. This purpose must be explained
3. They must be referenced if not your own - Check *Cite them Right* for styles
4. They must be labelled
5. They can be listed in the contents page so they are easy to find

5.2 If appropriate add an image or colour to the title page or front cover of your report. You can also use colour within the main body of your report.

6. Example of Reports

6.1 Scientific

- Invertebrate Survey (Telfer, 2013)
- The Clean Growth Strategy (HM Government, 2017)

6.2 Business / Policing

- Smart Cities (McKinsey & Co, 2018)
- Report of the Stephen Lawrence Enquiry (Macpherson, 1999)

7. References

HM Government (2017) *The clean growth strategy: leading the way to a low barbon future*. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/700496/clean-growth-strategy-correction-april-2018.pdf (Accessed: 9 August 2018).

Macpherson, W. (1999) *Report of the Stephen Lawrence Enquiry.* Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-stephen-lawrence-inquiry (Accessed: 9 August 2018).

McKinsey (2018) *Smart cities: digital solutions for a more livable future.* Available at: https://www.mckinsey.com/~/media/McKinsey/Industries/Capital%20Projects%20and%20Infrastructure/Our%20Insights/Smart%20cities%20Digital%20solutions%20for%20a%20more%20livable%20future/MGI-Smart-Cities-Full-Report.ashx (Accessed: 9 August 2018).

Telfer, M.G. (2013) *Invertebrate survey of Northstowe, Cambridgeshire*. Available at: https://www.scambs.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/ES%20Appendix%20F_Part_8_0.pdf (Accessed: 9 August 2018).

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8. Further reading

Check Onesearch for the full range of titles available. Some will be aimed at general audiences, others at specific subject areas.

Bogg, D. (2016) *Report writing for social workers*. 2nd edn. London: Open University Press.

Bowden, J. (2011) *Writing a report: how to prepare, write and present really effective reports*. 9th edn. Oxford: How to Books.

Forsyth, P. (2016) *How to write reports and proposals*. 4th edn. London: Kogan Page.

Price, M. (2013) *Lab reports and projects in sport and exercise science: a guide for students*. Harlow: Pearson.

Reid, M. (2012) *Report writing*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

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