**Report Writing**

### 1. Introduction

Reports are written for a clear purpose and to a specific audience. They usually address a specific issue or challenge and are often commissioned when a decision needs to be made. They present the author's findings in relation to the issue or challenge and then recommend a course of action for the organisation to take. The key to a good report is in-depth analysis. Good writers will show their reader how they have interpreted their findings. The reader will understand the basis on which the conclusions are drawn as well as the rationale for the recommendations.

There are various types of reports, for example, technical or business reports, field reports and scientific reports.

**Technical or Business Reports**: reports written in fields such as engineering, IT, commerce and finance. In academia, these are set in the form of a case study or a problem and the report is done to mirror 'real world' industry reports.

**Field reports:** reports written in fields such as Law, Psychology, Nursing and History. These require a student to analyse his or her observations of a phenomena or situation in light of theories studied in the course.

**Scientific Reports:** reports commonly written in the Sciences and Social Sciences field. They are also known as laboratory reports. They use a standard scientific report format describing methods, results and conclusions to report upon an empirical investigation.

### 2. The Report Writing Process

### I.     Planning you Report

As in all writing, planning is vitally important. The key questions to ask yourself when planning a report are:

- What is the purpose of this report?
- Who are the readers of this report?
- What are the report's main messages?
- How will the report be structured?

### A. What is the purpose of this report?
Keep in mind that reports generally provide information and/or assist in decision-making by highlighting key findings of some type of research or field work and/or specific activity. Be sure you are clear on what the purpose of your report is before you start writing. It might be useful to consider the purpose in this way: *As a result of this report, my reader/s will …*

For example*: As a result of this report, my reader/s will know: - how well our recycling programme is doing - how to increase participation in it.*

### B. Who are the readers of this report?
Consider the main reader/s, but also the secondary readers. The main reader for the recycling report alluded to above is the director of the recycling programme. Secondary readers might be the facility's management team, the finance team, etc. Try to understand what the readers already know, what they need to know and how they will use this report. You will need to give adequate information to satisfy all these potential readers. You will need to use headings carefully so that different readers can use the report in different ways.

### C. What are the report's main messages?
Taking into account the information above, think carefully about the main message/s you need to convey and therefore what information is required. Ask yourself: *What are the required pieces of information I need to include?*

### D. How will the messages be structured?
The modern approach is direct (or deductive, to use a more sophisticated term). This approach presents the conclusions or recommendations near the beginning of the report, and the report provides justification for these recommendations. This approach will be used for the remainder of this course and for report-writing in general. It should be noted, however, that there is, sometimes, a place for the indirect (inductive) approach. This approach leads the reader through the discussion first and reveals the conclusions and recommendations at the end of the report. This approach might be used if the recommendations are likely to be controversial or unpopular (Emerson, 1995).

The next step is to construct an outline, or structure, for your report. Check for a logical flow and check your outline against your purpose, your reader/s, and the report's relevant information requirements.


### II.        Structuring your report – The Direct Approach


A report may contain:

- a covering letter or memorandum (when appropriate)
- a title page
- an executive summary (business reports), abstract (academic reports)
- a table of contents
- an introduction
- conclusions
- recommendations
- findings and discussion
- Appendices.

### A. Covering letter/memorandum
Often a letter is attached to a report to officially introduce the report to the recipient. If the recipient is outside the organisation, a letter format is appropriate; if the recipient is inside the organisation, a memorandum/memo is appropriate.

### B. Title Page
The title page should be brief but descriptive of the project. It should also include the date of completion/submission of the report, the author/s, and their association/organisation.

### C. Executive Summary/ Abstract
The executive summary/abstract follows the title page, and should make sense on its own. The executive summary helps the reader quickly grasp the report's purpose, conclusions and key recommendations. You may think of this as something the busy executive might read to get a feel for your report and its final conclusions. The executive summary/abstract should be no longer than one page. The executive summary differs from an abstract in that it provides the key recommendations and conclusions, rather than a summary of the document.

### D. Table of Contents
The table of contents follows the executive summary/abstract on a new page. It states the pages for various sections. The reader receives a clear orientation to the report as the table of contents lists all the headings and sub-headings in the report. These headings and sub-headings should be descriptive of the content they relate to.

### E. Introduction
The introduction sets the stage for the reader. It gives the context for the report and generates the reader's interest. It orients the reader to the purpose of the report and gives him/her a clear indication of what they should expect.

### F. Conclusions/recommendations
A report usually needs both conclusions and recommendations. The difference between conclusions and recommendations in a report lies in the orientation to time. Conclusions typically relate to the present or past situation.

Recommendations are oriented to the future: what changes are recommended, or what actions are recommended for the future? They are specific, action-oriented suggestions to solve the report problem.

Although the conclusions and recommendations are presented before the discussion, they need to logically flow from the discussion. Taking a deductive approach allows the reader insight into your conclusions/recommendations early on. When your reader reads the discussion afterwards, they will follow it more easily.

## G. Discussion and findings

The discussion is the main part of your report and should present and discuss your findings. It should give enough information, analysis and evidence to support your conclusions, and it should provide justification for your recommendations. Its organisation will depend on your purpose, scope and requirements, but it should follow a logical and systematic organisation. The discussion should be subdivided into logical sections, each with informative, descriptive headings and a number.

Where your report's purpose is to recommend the best solution to a problem, you should show clear analysis of all options. You should explain any analytical framework you used, such as SWOT or cost benefit analysis. This analysis of options can often be presented effectively in tables.

## III.     Writing your report

Now that you have organised your thoughts, you need to put them into writing. Ensure your writing demonstrates clarity and logic. You should think constantly about your readers and make your report easy for them to read. To achieve good readability, you should:

- use effective headings and subheadings;
- structure your paragraphs well;
- write clear sentences with plain language ;
- keep your writing professional;
- use white space and well-chosen fonts;
- number your pages and
- use footnotes, tables, figures, and appendices appropriately.

## A. Use effective headings and subheadings

Headings and subheadings are useful tools in writing. Ensure they are descriptive of the content to follow. In other words, rather than labelling a section **Section 2.5**, it would be better to describe it as **2.5 Justification for the high risk scenario**. It is also essential that the hierarchy of headings and subheadings is clear. Use formatting (font size, bold, etc.) to show headings versus subheadings. Headings/subheadings at the same level should use parallel form (the same grammatical construction).

Use sentence case for headings. This means that your first word should have a capital letter, but subsequent words have small letters. Remember to ensure that all material placed

underneath a heading serves that heading. It is easy to go off on a tangent that does not relate to a heading. Remember also that all content must relate to your purpose. Every time you write a new section of your report, check that it fulfils the purpose of the report.

### B. Structure your paragraphs well

Your headings will help create logical flow for your reader, but under each heading, you should create a series of paragraphs that are also logically ordered and structured. Paragraphs should be ordered in a logical sequence beginning with the most important material first. Within your paragraphs you should also use a structure that helps your reader. Each paragraph should begin with a topic sentence that states the main idea or topic of the paragraph.

Typically, a paragraph will have between 100 and 200 words and will have the following structure.

- Topic sentence (states main idea of paragraph)
- Explanation sentence (explains or expands on the topic sentence)
- Support sentences (give evidence for the idea in the topic sentence and include statistics, examples, and citations)
- Concluding sentence (optional final sentence that answers the question 'so what?' This is your opportunity to show your critical thinking ability.) Remember to link your paragraphs well.

Write clear sentences with plain language, and your writing should be clear. You want to clearly communicate your understanding of the topic and the strength of your argument. In order to do this, keep your sentences short and use plain language where you can. (Write Limited, 2013). Sentences that are too long and complicated are difficult to understand. A good average length is 15–20 words (roughly 1.5 lines). Try not to go over 2 lines.

Sometimes people try to use big words in order to sound intelligent. This is not always a good idea. If you need a big (sometimes technical) word, use it; however, if a shorter one does the job, use that one instead. . For example, "use" is better than "utilise", and "change" is better than "modification". Look at the following example:

> *"Phase one of the project included the collection of a range of data and research material completed during 2011, which was utilised in the creation of a range of soon to be finalised analyst 'personas', and input into the planning of a new enhanced information architecture for the business's online channel, particularly resources for current analysts".*

Now look at a plainer version:

> *"In 2011, the team undertook phase one of the project. They collected a range of data and research material. Using this collected material, they created analyst 'personas'. They also began to plan an enhanced information architecture for the*

*business's online channel. Current analysts can use some of the resources the team have created."*

You will notice some of the sophisticated words have changed to plainer ones. You will also notice that the sentences are shorter and easier to understand. Another change relates to 'active voice'. You will notice that the first example uses some 'passive voice': which was utilised. Passive voice enables writers to omit the people (or doers) from their sentences. However, readers often appreciate knowing 'who' does something. You will notice in the second example, the writer adds a doer: team.

This means the writer can now use the active voice: In 2011, the team completed…  All of these techniques—short sentences, plainer language, and active voice—will help your reader understand your message in one reading.

### C. Keep your writing formal (professional)

Ensure you use an appropriate tone for your readers. Where possible, use personal pronouns we and you: We recommend you check the building's foundations. Personal pronouns create a friendly tone that is appropriate for business and government. They also help the writer avoid the passive voice. And, as stated above, readers like to know 'who' will do something. However, sometimes you might want a more formal tone where personal pronouns are not appropriate. In these cases, you can use words like research or report as your sentence subject: *This report discusses…, this research has found that….*

Another way of ensuring appropriate tone is to avoid terms that may be interpreted as offensive to ethnic or other groups. Be careful to use gender-neutral terms. For example, use plural pronouns (they when referring to clients) rather than gender-specific pronouns (he or he/she). Another aspect of tone relates to the use of contractions. Contractions are words like "we've" or "it's". They are informal. For many business reports, you will need to avoid them and write "We have" or "It is".

### IV.     Editing your report

Other important characteristics of professional writing are editing and proofreading.

You should leave at least 24 hours between writing your first draft and editing it. You should also leave another 24 hours between editing and proofreading. Leaving time between these stages of the writing process allows you to detach yourself from your writing and put yourself in your reader's shoes. When editing, check for:

- illogical structure
- missing headings
- irrelevant or missing content
- unnecessary content
- redundant phrases or words.

When proofreading, check for:

- grammar
- punctuation
- spelling
- formatting
- consistency.

Remember to leave enough time for these last two stages. Thorough editing and proofreading will make a big difference to the readability of your report, and it is a courtesy to the reader.

### D. Use white space and well-chosen fonts

White space refers to the empty space on the page. Reports which have a more balanced use of white space and text are easier to read and more effectively communicate main points and subordinate ideas. Create white space by:

- using lots of headings and subheadings;
- creating large margins along all edges (usually 2.5–3cm);
- breaking up your page with tables, charts  and graphs where possible and
- using bulleted lists.

### E. Number your pages

Your title page has no number. Use Roman numerals for the executive summary and table of contents (i, ii, iii), and Arabic numbers for the remainder of the report (1, 2, 3 …).  Use footnotes, tables, figures, and appendices appropriately. Footnotes should be used sparingly. Points that are important can usually be integrated into the text. Footnotes or endnotes should not be used for referencing (see References above).

In most reports, tables and figures are often used to represent data, processes, etc. Tables and figures should be inserted in the text of the document, close to the discussion of the table/figure. If the information is something which the reader could refer to rather than should refer to, then it may go in the appendices. Tables and figures have different purposes. A table contains an array of numbers or text (such as a SWOT table).

A figure is something that contains graphical content, such as graphs created in Excel, organisational charts or flow charts. Insert each table/figure one-and-a-half or two lines below the text. The table/figure should be identified with a label and title which describes the content, for example, **Table 1. GDP of Namibia, 1998–2002**. If a table, figure, or appendix is included in a document, then there must be text that refers to it! The text should refer to it by name (As Table 1 shows ….). The text should explain the highlights of the table or figure, not every detail. Do not leave it to the reader to try to figure out why you included the table or figure in your document.

At the same time, ensure that your tables/figures supplement and clarify the text, but do not completely duplicate it. Also ensure that there is sufficient information in the table or figure so that the reader can understand it without having to consult the text. Footnotes immediately underneath the table or figure should be used to explain all abbreviations and symbols used. Do not forget to add the source of your material.

### 3. Alternative report: The Indirect Approach

**Title Page**

This section includes your name, the date and for whom the report is written.

**Abstract**

- In less than 200 words ... what was the problem, how was it investigated, what did you find out and what do your findings mean?

**Table of Contents**

- A list of the major and minor sections of your report

**Introduction**

- Set the scene; give some background information about the topic. State the aim/purpose of the investigation. Outline the body sections.

**Main Body: The Discussion**

- Organise the sections in a logical sequence: what you investigated, what you found, what interpretations and what judgements you made. Use short informative headings and subheadings.

**Conclusion**

- What has been achieved and what is the significance of your findings and your discussion? Have your aims been successful or not?

**Recommendations**

- What do you recommend as a course of action following your conclusion?

**References**

- A list of all the sources you used

**Appendices**

- Any information (graphs, charts, tables or other data) you used in your report but did not include in the body.

Appendix A: Checklist of a report

- ☐ The report fulfils its purpose.
- ☐ The report is oriented to the intended reader/s.
- ☐ The report contains all appropriate elements (executive summary, table of contents …).
- ☐ The discussion has descriptive and appropriately formatted headings and subheadings.
- ☐ The discussion contains thorough analysis of findings as well as logical flow.
- ☐ The report has been edited for section cohesiveness and good paragraph structure.
- ☐ The report has been proofread for sentence structure, spelling, punctuation and consistency.
- ☐ Tables and figures are formatted correctly and labelled.
- ☐ Tables, figures, and appendices are referred to within the text / discussion.
- ☐ Quotations from other sources are referenced.
- ☐ Thoughts and ideas paraphrased from other sources are referenced.
- ☐ The reference list is formatted properly.
- ☐ The cover page has all necessary details.
- ☐ Appendices are used to support the discussion, but tables / figures which are essential to the discussion are included within the text.

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