WRITING A REPORT

What are reports and why do we write them?

Reports are a widely used form of communication in the professional world and are therefore an important skill to learn and refine while at university. Reports tend to be **written for a specific purpose with a specific audience in mind**. They require you to research and evaluate the evidence relating to a given topic and present the findings in a clear and logical format.

What is the difference between a report and an essay?

Reports are similar to essays in that they require (i) a formal style of writing, (ii) an introduction, body and conclusion, and (iii) supporting evidence. However, unlike essays which are structured around an argument extending over many pages, reports are designed to be scanned and mined for information, with a practical problem or issue in mind.

Because of this, reports tend to be more **formally structured** than essays. For example, they often include a table of contents, numbered headings and sub-headings, and page numbers so that a reader can quickly access the most important information in the report. It is also common to include tables and figures to succinctly summarise important information.

Because executives who read reports are often time-poor, an executive summary is usually included. Furthermore, reports often include recommendations about a possible course of action.

Key Considerations

When researching and writing your report you should consider the following:

Problem definition:
- What is the topic/problem/situation? What is your research question?
- Why is it a problem? Why does it need to be researched? Why is it important?
- What is the scope of the problem?
- What activity will you carry out to address this problem? (e.g., conduct a survey, review the literature)

Target audience:
- Who is the report designed for? Identifying the background of your audience allows you to determine how much context is required and whether you should use technical or non-technical terms.

Evaluation of evidence:
- What information needs to be collected to address the question or problem?
- What does the available evidence suggest? Is there a general consensus or conflicting findings in the literature?
- What is the quality of the evidence? Note any major gaps in the available literature.

Possible solutions:
- Given the available evidence, how can the problem be addressed? You can also acknowledge any limitations of current approaches that may be in place.

What do I include?

Reports are generally structured using the following elements. However, the format of reports may vary depending on your field of study so make sure you check the specific requirements of your unit.

- **Title page:** Provide a succinct title that states the major aim of the report.
- **Executive summary:** Summarise the aims, major findings, conclusions and any recommendations stated in the report. The executive summary should provide enough information for the reader to gain a quick overview of the topic without needing to read the whole report.
- **Glossary:** Provide an alphabetised list and definition of technical terms used throughout the report.
- **Table of contents:** List all the headings in the report with the page number for where the section begins. Make sure a consistent numbering system is employed. You may like to make use of the 'table of contents' feature in your word processor.
- **Introduction:** State the purpose of the report and outline its scope and approach. You may include background information here, define important terms and concepts, and summarise relevant literature, although it is also common for these elements to find their way into the main body of the report.
- **Main body of the report:** Report on the major findings of your research. This section should be structured so that it has a clear and logical flow. Use short and informative headings and sub-headings to organise the information.
- **Conclusion and recommendations:** Succinctly summarise the major findings. Make sure you do not introduce any new material at this stage. Suggest the best course of action based on the available evidence. The recommendations should logically flow from the information presented in the main body of the report.
- **Appendices:** Include supporting documents that are too lengthy or detailed to include in the main body of the report.
- **References:** Provide a list of the sources that have been employed in the report.

In summary

An effective report:
- Clearly defines the issue and the scope of the analysis
- Provides an accurate summary of the topic that is suited to its audience
- Is structured so that it may be scanned quickly by the reader

Like this Survival Guide? Why not check out...
Survival Guides: *Structuring essays, Starting assignments, Lab reports, Introductions and conclusions, Paraphrasing.*
Want to know more about STUDY*Smarter*?
Find out about all our services and resources at: www.studysmarter.uwa.edu.au
Any suggestions?
We'd love to hear from you. Email us at study.smarter@uwa.edu.au