

WRITING A REPORT

What is a report?

Reports are widely used in the workplace. Report writing is therefore an important skill to learn and refine while at university.



Reports tend to be written for a specific purpose and a specific audience. They require you to research and evaluate the evidence and present your findings in a clear and logical format.

Comparing reports and essays

A report is **not an essay**, although there are similarities between them. Both require:

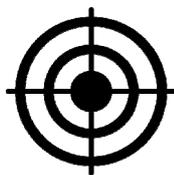
- an introduction, body and conclusion;
- a formal style of writing; and
- evidence to support any conclusions.

However, while essays are structured around an argument, reports are written with a practical problem or issue in mind.

As a result, a report tends to be more **formally structured** and **direct** than essays, with features such as:

- a table of contents;
- numbered headings and subheadings;
- page numbers; and
- tables and figures to succinctly summarise important information.

These features enable the reader (often a time-poor executive) to quickly access important information in the report and make a decision.



Key considerations in a report

When researching and writing your report, consider the following:

Problem definition:

- What is the topic, problem or situation?
- 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)? Why?

Target audience

- Who is the report designed for?

TIP

Identifying your audience (the “client”) 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? Do your results suggest a particular solution?
- What is the quality of the evidence? Note any major gaps in the available literature. Reflect on the limitations of your own results.

Possible solutions:

- Given the available evidence, how can the problem be addressed? What do you recommend? You can also acknowledge any limitations of current approaches that may be in place.

Structuring a report

The precise format of a report may vary from unit to unit, so check with your marker to be certain. As a general guide, however, reports often include the following elements:

1. Title page: provides a succinct title that states the major aim of the report.

2. Executive summary: summarises the aims, major findings, conclusions and any recommendations stated in the report.

TIP

The executive summary should enable the reader to gain a quick overview of the topic without needing to read the whole report.

3. Glossary: provides an alphabetised list and definition of technical terms used.

4. Table of contents: lists all the headings in the report with the page number for where the section begins.

TIP

Use the 'Table of Contents' feature in your word processor to help create a Table of Contents for your report.

5. Introduction: states the purpose, scope and approach of the report. You may also (briefly) include background information, define key terms, and introduce relevant literature. However, save most of this discussion for the main body of the report.

6. Main body of the report: reports on the major findings of your research. This section should be structured so it has a clear and logical flow. Use headings and subheadings to organise the information.

7. Conclusion and recommendations: succinctly summarises the report's major findings without introducing any new material. After summarising the findings, suggest the best course of action based on the available evidence.

TIP

Make sure your recommendations flow logically from the information presented in the main body of the report.

8. Appendices: include supporting documents that are too lengthy or detailed to include in the main body of the report.

9. References: provide a list of the sources that have been employed in the report.

Quick summary

An effective report:

- Unambiguously defines the issue and the scope of the analysis;
- Provides an accurate summary of the topic that is suited to its audience; and
- Is clearly structured so the reader can quickly scan and understand it.



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