



# Report writing

## 1. Overview

### Introduction

The purpose of this unit is to introduce you to some general aspects of report writing in both the university context as well as the workplace. As your understanding of the general function and structure of reports increases, it is hoped you will be better able to adapt your report writing knowledge to the various contexts and audiences which you will meet at university and in the workplace. This general unit on report writing is supplemented by individual units on different types of reports from a range of disciplines. These units include explanations as well as annotated sample reports.

### The purpose of reports

Reports communicate information which has been compiled as a result of research and analysis of data and of issues. Often reports are structured in a way that reflects the information finding process and the writing up of the findings: that is, summary of the contents, introduction or background, methods, results, discussion, conclusion and/or recommendations. The inclusion of recommendations is one reason why reports are a common form of writing in industry, as the informed recommendations are useful for decision making. For example, a local council which has received a development application may commission a heritage consultant to prepare a report on the heritage values of the proposed development site. The recommendations of the report will be taken into account by the council when considering the development application.

The type of information to be communicated in a report and who the information is for will affect a report's scope and style. For example, technical reports communicate technical information, so the degree of technicality in the report will depend on the reader's familiarity and understanding of technical concepts. Progress reports are likely to foreground a different type of information, namely achieved outcomes and projected outcomes. The degree of formality and objectivity in reports is also another variable depending on the report's audience and purpose.

### Report writing in the workplace

In any large organisation there is likely to be numerous types of reports with different functions such as feasibility reports, technical reports, field trip reports, incident reports, progress reports, annual reports, project reports, financial reports etc. An organisation may require these reports to be written in particular formats depending on whether the report is an interdepartmental communication, or for an organisation external to the company. Similarly, sections of a report such as executive summaries are likely to have greater importance if the report functions to inform management of departmental activities or issues.



#### 1. Overview



#### 2. Writing laboratory reports



#### 3. Writing accounting and finance reports



#### 4. Writing technical reports

## Learning objectives

This module will help you to:

- understand the generic function and structure of reports
- understand how different types of reports and their audiences influence the structure and style of the report
- set out the information in your report
- refer to any tables and graphs in your report in an effective way
- use appropriate grammatical structures



## Report writing at university

Assignment writing at university frequently involves the writing of essays and reports. Explained simply, these two text types, or 'genres', differ in that in a report the information is organised into sections with headings, while an essay's focus is primarily to set out a logical argument in response to a question and support this with evidence. In some disciplines such as Management, however, the distinction between an essay and a report can be blurred. For example, a management essay can be structured more like a report with headings separating the sections of the essay.

Disciplines with an applied focus, such as Engineering and Accounting and Finance require students to write reports as the process apprentices the students into the practices of the profession. This means students are given assignments in the form of a problem. The students research the problem, and present the results of the research in a report format to an imaginary client. In other words, the process of report writing in the university context is sometimes used to simulate the process of report writing in industry. This type of report writing is often called a case study report.

Another type of report frequent at university is the report which combines students' observations of phenomena or events in the real world with theories studied in the course. This is called a field report. Examples of field reports are Law court observation reports, History site reports, and Education teaching observation reports. A more detailed and extensive type of report is the research or project report. Research students or fourth year honours students who design a research project are assessed on their research report, which reports on the project design, methods, results and discussion.

## Report structure

If you have an assignment which requires you to prepare a report, it is best to first check any faculty guidelines as to how the report should be presented. For example, should your report contain an Executive Summary? Should the Discussion section be separate to the Results? Before you approach your tutor with these questions, it is helpful to have a general understanding of the function of the different sections of reports. The following information on report structure is intended as a general overview.

Information in reports is divided into sections with headings. The headings help the reader locate relevant information quickly. Depending on the length of the report the headings can be numbered. The most common sections are given in Table 1.

## Tables and graphs

When writing your results section you may find it necessary to include numerical data in the form of tables and graphs. Tables and graphs allow you to include more information such as trends, interactions, changes over time, or some other variable. This type of information needs to be integrated into the written presentation of the results. In your discussion of the results represented in the tables or graphs you may wish to highlight information which you consider significant, or compare data presented in separate tables. It's important that you *do* discuss the results represented by the tables and graphs, and not just try and let the table or graph 'speak for itself'.

Your discussion of any numerical data or other tabular information requires the tables to be clearly labelled and accurately referred to in your written discussion. Each table or graph should have a title and a number, for example **Figure 1: Retention Rates in 1998**. The title should include enough information to enable the figure to 'stand alone'. If your report includes a large number of figures and tables it is advisable to list these in the table of contents.

## Grammatical features of reports

Reports written in the university context tend to be formal, impersonal and contain technical language. The formal and impersonal nature of reports can be achieved by avoiding slang terms, contractions (*didn't*, *won't* etc), and strong expressions of opinion and attitude. In addition, the passive voice (*were specified*, *it is suggested* etc.) allows writers to foreground what was done, rather than who did it, thus making the writing less personal. Look at the excerpt below from an engineering report to see how the student achieved a suitably formal and impersonal level of language.

The design team *constructed 2 prototypes*: design A and design B. Construction of the prototypes was *achieved* using a hand angle grinder, a gas equipped MIG welder and a metal cutting saw. The materials used in construction were those *specified* in the economical evaluation. After construction, the 2 prototypes were tested on a number of outdoor taps, and were both found to successfully *eliminate* difficulty in operating the taps. The slide-on channel fitting worked *exceptionally well*, *providing a secure* fit to the tap while being easy to attach and remove. The estimated handle sizes were correct, while the overall *dimensions* and *masses* of the 2 designs were also correct.

Phrases such as 'the design team' instead of the pronoun 'we' help to create impersonal and more formal language

The use of passive constructions such as 'the prototypes was tested' creates a more formal and less personal feel to the language. Notice how **Informal** the style would be if the writer had said 'we tested the prototypes'

If you would like to learn more about features of academic language, please see the Self Access module *Academic Writing*.

<b>TITLE PAGE</b>	<p>report title                      your name                      submission date</p>	
<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY or SYNOPSIS</b>	<p>aims                      subject matter                      methods of analysis                      findings                      recommendations</p>	<p><i>provides the reader with a concise overview of the aims, subject matter, method, findings and recommendations. It should be no longer than a page.</i></p>
<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS</b>	<p>list of numbered sections in report</p>	<p><i>necessary in reports longer than a few pages.</i></p>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<p>aims                      outline of report's structure                      background</p>	<p><i>introduces the topic of the report, and provides an outline of its structure. The background may be in the form of a literature review.</i></p>
<b>BODY or METHODS</b>	<p>section headings                       description of procedure, materials data</p>	<p><i>headings and sub-headings which reflect the contents of each section</i>   <i>describes the materials and methods used to collect, collate and analyse research data. If your research didn't include experiments, you won't need a methods section.</i></p>
<b>RESULTS AND DISCUSSION</b>	<p>findings</p>	<p><i>presents findings, and interprets results. This may be linked back to the literature review. (If you don't have a methods section in your report, you may only present a conclusion)</i></p>
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<p>recommendations</p>	<p><i>discusses the implications of the findings, and depending on the topic may make recommendations</i></p>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	<p>list of references</p>	<p><i>list of reference material consulted during research for report</i></p>
<b>APPENDIX</b>	<p>numbered appendix items (eg. transcripts, documents etc)</p>	<p><i>information that supports your analysis but is not essential to its explanation</i></p>

**Table 1:** Generic Structure of Reports

### Reference

Skillen, J. Wypych, P. & Draisma, K. (1999). *Report Writing Guidelines for ENGG154 Engineering Design and Innovation*, University of Wollongong.