



## Report writing

# Overview



UNIVERSITY  
OF WOLLONGONG  
AUSTRALIA

### **PURPOSE**

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.

### **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.

### **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.

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### **ACADEMIC LITERACY**

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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.

## 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:

- Title page
- Summary (abstract, executive summary), indicating the topic and giving readers a concise overview of the aims, methods and key findings of the investigation.
- Table of contents
- Introduction, providing both context and a preview of the whole the report. The context might include the intellectual background, in the form of a literature review.
- Main sections (organised and labelled with headings, covering eg. materials and methods used to collect, collate and analyse research data, or sub-topics explored)
- Results, presenting the outcome of some kind of data analysis.
- Discussion, presenting an interpretation of the results, with reference to the literature.
- Conclusion, presenting implications of findings, and perhaps some specific recommendations
- References
- Appendices (if necessary), providing additional information that supports the analysis but is not essential to its explanation within the main body of the text.

Report structure can vary significantly between different disciplines, so please refer to the annotated text examples from particular disciplines for further detail, and ask your teachers for more examples, to help you recognise typical patterns and expectations in your own discipline.

## TABLES & 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 2019**. 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

Reports 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. The passive voice (*were specified*, *it is suggested* etc) also helps writers foreground what was done, rather than who did it, making the writing less personal.

### Examples

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.

*'the design team' is more formal / impersonal than 'we'*

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

*passive constructions ('the prototypes were tested') are more formal / impersonal than 'we tested the prototypes'*

