

Guide to Report Writing.

Do you know what the purpose of your report is? Check your assessment guidance or module outline.

Reports are fact-based, structured pieces of writing. They usually give information about an activity, project, a piece of research, event or experiment. The purpose is usually to present the key knowledge gained from this activity, evaluate this information and reach a conclusion or make recommendations.

Key differences from essay writing.

Reports are usually more structured than essays, with lots of headings, subheadings, and a clearer separation between factual information and the author's interpretation. They are also more likely to include graphs, charts and other figures. Sections may also be numbered.

Audience:

Who is the intended audience of your report?

Reports are often intended for a professional or practitioner audience, rather than an academic audience. This means they need to be concise, clear and make the relevance of the information and conclusions very clear. Remember that although your tutor may be the only one who will ACTUALLY read it, the assignment may require you to IMAGINE that there is a different audience.

Style:

What style should your report be written in?

Keep sentences short and factual. Paragraphs may also be quite short, compared to essays. Most reports should be written in academic style i.e. objective language, third person, and passive voice (i.e. 'the procedure was conducted'). Some reports, like reflective reports and laboratory reports, may be clearer if written in the first person (i.e. 'I did the experiment'), and this is preferred in some social science research reports. Check with your lecturer. Bullet point lists may be acceptable also.

Types of report:

What type of report are you writing?

There are many different types of report, and each one will have particular elements that need to be included in the main body. Here are a few different possibilities:

- Project report;
- Research report;
- Laboratory report;
- Case study;
- Social work;
- Reflective report;
- Technical report.

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Content:

Almost every report needs to answer these questions, can you answer them for your report:

- What is the purpose of the report? (you'll see words like 'remit, scope and parameters' used too).
- What is the context of the activity (the experiment, research, intervention, etc)?
- What is the activity? Describe the research, intervention, event, etc. Why was it done in this way?
- What type of information was gathered? Where did this information come from?
- What is the theory, previous research or established best practice related to this area?
- What was the outcome? What are the findings or results?
- How do you interpret these findings or results? Was the outcome positive or negative, expected or unexpected?
- What lessons can be learned from this activity (experiment, research, intervention, case study)? How should it be done differently in future?

Generic structure:

Many reports follow a structure like this, which follows the questions above. Do think about which section do you need to write? Which ones are not relevant to your assignment?

- Executive summary or abstract: outline the whole report in less than 200 words.
- Introduction: context and purpose.
- Literature review: what is already known in this area (rely on published academic work i.e. books and journal articles).
- Methodology or methods: how did you gather information or set about the activity?
- Results: data and outcomes of activity, experiment, etc.
- Discussion or analysis: interpretation of results.
- Conclusion: show how the purpose has been achieved (or not).
- Recommendations (may be included in conclusion): lessons learnt, possibilities for future activities or research.
- Reference list: sources used.
- Appendices: further details to illustrate main body (e.g. full findings, examples of materials, etc.).

Other possible elements:

Do you need to include any of these additional elements?

- Letter of transmittal: if your report is written for a particular person, this is the cover letter you would include.
- Title page: should include title, authors names, date of submission, etc.
- Glossary and/or list of key abbreviations: should include key vocabulary and abbreviations or acronyms with explanations or definitions.
- Table of contents: should include headings and page numbers.
- Acknowledgements: thanks to key people who helped you.

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Here are some examples of how this general structure might be adapted to different types of reports. If you look at the different examples, you will see that they all cover the content questions listed above, but may organise the information differently and emphasise different parts. This shows that there is no single 'business report' or 'scientific report' structure. But there are many similarities in the information they cover and the order in which it is presented. The most important thing to remember is to address the aim given in your assessment guidance!

Laboratory report.

1. Introduction:

- Topic and purpose,
- Relevant theory,
- Previous research findings (combines literature review with introduction),
- Experimental hypothesis.

2. Method:

- Materials: what was used,
- Procedure: steps followed.

3. Results:

- Data, in figures and charts,
- Brief description of the data.

4. Discussion:

- Data explained in light of hypothesis and previous findings,
- Explains any unusual outcomes.

5. Conclusions and recommendations:

- Suggestions for improving experimental method,
- Possible practical applications of findings,
- Recommendations for future research.

6. References

7. Appendices

- Full data charts.

Social Science Research Report.

This report structure is used where the student had to collect primary research through surveys or interviews to address a social problem.

Introduction:

- Background to the issue, question or problem,
- Topic,
- General overview of previous research,
- The need for this research: rationale or justification,
- Define the research questions or aims.

Literature review:

- Which theories will be used in the interpretation of the data or have been applied to this particular issue,
- Previous research on this topic, organised by theme.

Methods:

- Approach to research and justification,
- Materials and procedures followed,
- Description of sample,
- Ethics procedures followed.

Results & Discussion:

This is often combined especially with qualitative research.

- Presentation of findings or data,
- Interpretation in relation to literature review.

Conclusion:

- Main findings in relation to purpose and research questions.

References:

Appendices:

- Example questionnaire or interview schedule,
- Interview transcripts or full data sets,
- Copy of ethical clearance or consent forms.

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Business report.

In this example the business report is an evaluation of a cross-cultural training initiative, where the student had to respond to the client's needs, conduct the training and evaluate it.

Introduction:

- Background to the client or stakeholders,
- Aims for the training,
- Problems training is designed to address.

Cross-cultural training:

- Review of theory and research on cross-cultural training,
- Establish best practice.

Method:

- How the training was organised and planned and why,
- How it will be evaluated.

Results:

- How the training went, attendance, any problems, etc.
- Evaluation – client feedback, outcomes.

Discussion:

- Compare results to literature review: expected or unexpected outcomes,
- How the training could have been improved.

Conclusion:

- Summary of results and evaluation.

Recommendations:

- For the particular company or client,
- For future research or other companies.

References.

Appendices:

- Copies of training materials,
- Budget,
- Timescales agreed with client,
- Etc.

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Reflective report.

In this example the report is from an education context and is about an incident during placement, where the purpose of the assignment is to establish the causes of a conflict and evaluate possible solutions.

Introduction:

- Context: where was the placement, what was the role of the student,
- Brief summary of conflict (as objective as possible),
- Purpose of report.

Literature review:

- relevant research and theory to contextualise the event.

Causes:

- use information from literature to identify possible causes,
- apply these to the conflict and discuss how significant each one may have been,
- students' role in causing or attempting to prevent conflict (important for a reflective report).

Solutions:

- how the conflict was dealt with,
- relate solutions to literature,
- evaluate how effective solutions were,
- students' role in solution.

Discussion:

- conclude which causes were most important and why,
- consider why particular solutions were used,
- evaluate own behaviour and responses.

Recommendations:

- for the organisation, for the student,
- for future research.