

What is a report?

A report is a systematic, well organized document which defines and analyses a subject or problem, and which may include:

- the record of a sequence of events
- interpretation of the significance of these events or facts
- evaluation of the facts or results of research presented
- discussion of the outcomes of a decision or course of action
- conclusions
- recommendations

Reports must always be:

- accurate
- concise
- clear
- well structured

Introduction (always included)

This should show that you have fully understood the task/brief and that you are going to cover everything required. Indicate the basic structure of the report.

You should include just a little background/context and indicate the reasons for writing the report. You may include your terms of reference and procedure/research methods if not covered elsewhere.

Your introduction will often give an indication of the conclusion to the report.

Main body/findings (always included)

This is the substance of your report. The structure will vary according to the nature of the material being presented, with headings and sub-headings used to clearly indicate the different sections (unlike an essay). A

"situation>problem>solution>evaluation" approach may be appropriate.

It is not sufficient to simply describe a situation. Your tutor will be looking for analysis and for a critical approach, when appropriate.

Charts, diagrams and tables can be used to reinforce your arguments, although sometimes it may be better to include these as an appendix

(particularly if they are long or complicated).

Do not include opinions, conclusions or recommendations in this section.

Results (possibly included in scientific/engineering reports)

This section records your observations (in the past tense) and would normally include statistics, tables or graphs.

Conclusion (always included)

Your conclusion should draw out the implications of your findings, with deductions based on the facts described in your main body. Don't include any new material here.

Recommendations (sometimes included)

These should follow on logically from your conclusion and be specific, measurable and achievable. They should propose how the situation/problem could be improved by suggesting action to be taken. A "statement of cost" should be included if you are recommending changes that have financial implications.

Recommendations can be numbered if you wish.

Consider the following aspects:

Style

To be completely successful, a report which makes recommendations must ensure that the persons for whom the report is intended:

- Read it without unnecessary delay.
- Understand everything in it without undue effort.
- Accept the facts, findings, conclusions and recommendations.
- Decide to take the action recommended.

Achieving this demands more of you than merely presenting relevant facts accurately. It also demands that you communicate in a way that is both *acceptable* and *intelligible* to the readers.

Selectivity

Careful choice of words can enable you to convey many subtleties of meaning.

Accuracy

Check that everything you write is factually accurate. The facts should be capable of being verified. Moreover, arguments should be soundly based and your reasoning should be logical. You should not write anything that will misinform, mislead or unfairly persuade your readers. If you do, you will be doing a disservice not only to yourself but also to your department and organization. Accurate information is essential for effective communication and decision making.

Objectivity

A report should not be an essay reflecting personal emotions and opinions. You must look at all sides of a problem with an open mind before stating your conclusions.

Making it clear that you have an open mind when writing your report will, in most cases, make your conclusions and recommendations more acceptable to your readers. The emphasis, therefore, should be on the factual material presented and the conclusions drawn, rather than on any personal beliefs, biases or prejudices.

Conciseness

Veni, Vidi, Vici (I came, I saw, I conquered). That is how Julius Caesar reported his visit to our shores. While none of your reports will be as short as this, you should aim to keep them concise. In doing this, do not mistake brevity for conciseness. A report may be brief because it omits important information. A concise report, on the other hand, is short but still contains all the essential details.

To ensure you do not include material which can safely be left out, you should not ask: 'Can this information be included?' Rather, you should ask: 'Is it *necessary* for this information to be included?'

Clarity and Consistency

The best way to achieve clarity in your writing is to allow some time to elapse between the first draft and its revision. Try to leave it over the weekend, or at least overnight. If you are really under pressure and this is simply not possible, at least leave it over a lunch or coffee break. It is essential to have a period of time, no matter how short, when you can think of other things. In this way, when you come back to the report, you can look at it with a degree of objectivity.

Simplicity

Usually, if your writing is selective, accurate, objective, concise, clear and consistent, it will also be as simple as it can be. You should guard against over-simplifying, for example to the point of missing out information which the reader needs to fully understand what you are trying to say. You should again keep your readers firmly in mind and keep asking yourself whether or not they will be able to follow the logic of your presentation.

Avoid Pointless Words

Some words and phrases - like *basically*, *actually*, *undoubtedly*, *each and every one* and *during the course of our investigation* - keep cropping up in reports. Yet they add nothing to the message and often can be removed without changing the meaning or the tone. Try leaving them out of your writing. You will find your sentences survive, succeed and may even flourish without them.