Writing Reports

Reports have many names, purposes and formats, and are usually written to specifications. That is, you are given the format details as well as the subject of the report.

INFORMATION NEEDED

Lecturers requiring written reports normally provide you with this information:
- The topic or subject of the report.
- Required length and due date.
- A clear idea of its purpose and its audience.
- The format: headings to be used and their order.

Many lecturers also provide:
- A detailed format including information about abstracts, summaries, conclusions, recommendations, and how these are to be presented.
- A model of a similar report showing style, and how diagrams and statistics are to be presented. This is normal practice in government and industry.

ASK YOURSELF:
- What exactly is the report about?
- What is it designed to achieve?
- What is its scope or range?
- What actions might follow from it?
- Is it objective and scientific? Are opinions and interpretations appropriate?
- What subject area criteria or views need to be considered?
- Are you aware of any theories, subject bias, ethical views or assumptions you need to keep in mind?

BEFORE YOUR SEARCH:
- Use the structure headings as a plan.
- Note research information under these headings on separate pages.
- Write a sentence or thesis statement clarifying the subject and purpose of the report. This may be used later in the report.
- Make headings specific. 'Introduction' may be better as 'Purpose' or 'Background'. 'Conclusion' may be better as 'Findings' or 'Recommendations'.
- Make a final check that you have all the information you need before you start to read, research or experiment.

NEW INFORMATION
Some reports require new information.
Plan experiments, interviews, measurements, questionnaires and other research methods carefully. Consider time-lines, size, costs, methods and problems.
Make sure the data will be complete well before the due date of the report.
Get help in designing methods and approaches if you're uncertain.

- Read only what you know is relevant.
- Read at an appropriate length: if only a little is required about a topic, read just as much as you need.
- Note only what you need. Notes will normally be about 20% of the final report length.
- Notes should be short: either briefly acknowledge quotations, or write information in your own words. This helps understanding and avoids copying and plagiarism.
- Write accurate bibliographic information about all sources as you read. Separate cards make it easier to alphabetise an index or references later.
WRITING THE DRAFT:
- Aim to write one draft only, which will be edited to provide the final copy.
- Keep your audience in mind as you draft.
- Because you have planned headings, some sections of the report can be written before the research is completed.
- Write the draft quickly and carefully to reduce later editing work. If you are ready to write the draft, you should have few delays. Don't stop to check spelling, punctuation, word choice. This is best done at the editing stage.
- Remember - reports impress through their accuracy and clarity rather than style.
- Reports should be concise: 'a word saved is a dollar saved'.
- Sentences are normally no longer than 21 words for most audiences.
- Explain terms which the reader may not know or where clarity requires it. Explain symbols, abbreviations, diagrams, and statistics if necessary.
- Some reports might require an impersonal, passive style: 'The climber was provided with a camera', rather than 'We gave the climber a camera'. Clarify this with your lecturer if you are in doubt.
- Decide on the numbering system before you start writing the draft. There are many different systems in use.
- Use short forms: tables, lists, note form, diagrams, where possible. Readers usually don't want long reports.
- Express doubts where there is uncertainty or alternative interpretations by using 'probably' or other modifiers.

EDITING:
Reports are scanned visually by skilled readers, not read word for word in most cases. The visual pattern is what matters. What it 'sounds' like is not relevant.

When editing:
- Be meticulous about references, footnotes, endnotes, bibliography and analysis.
- Check that the argument is logical.
- Make sure the purposes have been met.
- Check accuracy of data and facts.
- Include all specific parts.
- Make sure that conclusions and recommendations follow from the data.
- Use appropriate size and quality paper, margins, spacing, tables, graphs, diagrams and illustrations.

PROOFING:
After editing, proofread the final copy to eliminate slips of spelling, punctuation, etc. Keep your notes and a copy for your own reference until they are no longer required.

See relevant journals in the library for examples of reports in your area of study. Lecturing staff may help with further reading suggestions in particular subjects.

SEARCH THE eLIBRARY:
The eLibrary is available at www.kangan.edu.au/library To find LLC resources on writing reports use these key terms to search:
- Report writing
- Report writing – study and teaching

If you need extra help Ask a librarian! In person, over the phone 9279-2424 or via email LLC@kangan.edu.au