Huron
UNIVERSITY · CANADA

HOW TO WRITE A REPORT

Getting Started

A report is a fact-based piece of writing which sets out a problem and the possible solutions to that problem in a highly organized way. Some reports are short and informal and cover topics like accidents, incidents that happened in a plant, an inspection visit or a small project that has been completed. Others are longer, more formal and more detailed. They may be investigations of a problem, evaluations of a situation, or proposals to change something in the business or plant. Still others are very formal; they may be detailed descriptions of a long or expensive project that has been completed, or evaluations of complex problems that must be resolved after input from a variety of sources. The format of a report is usually determined by three things: Audience, Information, and Purpose.

Audience

The more distant the reader is from the source of the problem or project to be evaluated, the more detail the reader will need in order to understand the issues involved in the report. Hence formal reports are almost always prepared for someone **outside of the company or organization** preparing the report. That is why government reports of sub-committees are always so long. Because the reader may be anyone from members of parliament to any citizen in the country, those preparing the report must put in a lot of background material and detail that would be necessary for the reader to grasp the basic issues of the situation. On the other hand, project reports within a company prepared for your immediate boss could be much shorter and less formal because your boss is probably familiar with the context of the project and needs only to be filled in on the details.

Information

If you have a lot of complex information to include in your report, you will organize it in a different way than if your information is rather straightforward. Reports that are long and complex usually have an Abstract or Executive Summary at the beginning that tells the reader the purpose of the report, some of the major findings, and the recommendations made in the report. This is so that someone who is interested in the report's findings, but doesn't need to know the details of how or why those findings were reached, can still get useful information from the report without reading the whole thing. Similarly, the Table of Contents, and a List of Appendices will also help the reader get to the information he/she most needs to know. Again, such devices are generally not used for shorter, less form reports.

Purpose

The reason why you are writing the report will also determine how you format it. If you are writing an Incident or Accident Report about something that happened at work, you will have to include details of who it happened to, damage estimates, injuries, what time, exactly where and cost of replacement

workers. You must remember that some of those details will be crucial for filing insurance claims. If you are writing a Proposal, you must include reasons why this proposal should be accepted. Remember to be as specific as possible: It is a far stronger argument to say that a new process will save the company $20,000 a year, than to say simply: "It will save you money". Similarly, an Evaluation Report should include definitions of the criteria you used in doing the evaluation, and reasons why you chose those criteria (i.e. how those criteria fit the needs of your company).

ORGANIZING YOUR REPORT

Most reports have some or all of the following parts:

> Title Page
> Abstract/ Executive Summary
> Table of Contents
> Introduction
> Discussion
> Charts/ Tables
> Conclusions & Recommendations
> Appendices

Most companies and organizations have their own particular format for reports, so it is always a good idea to check with the person you are submitting the report to before you finalize your format.

Abstract/Executive Summary
This is two to three paragraphs long, and will tell the reader the purpose of the report, the method of investigation, how the discussion is organized, the major conclusions drawn and the recommendations presented in the body of the report. It should be organized in such a way that someone who picks up the report to browse through it will know immediately if it is something he or she might wish to read more carefully. Don't forget to tell the reader what the major recommendations are: the Executive Summary is not a mystery novel!

The Table of Content
This should list all the major divisions in the report, as well as the headings and sub-headings within each major division, in the order in which they appear in the text. It should also list the page references for those major divisions, headings and subheadings. See the example:

INTRODUCTION	1
Background:	1
Product development	2
Customer service	3
The Problem:	5
The Scope of This Report:	6

The major section is labeled "Introduction". Within that section, are the headings "Background" "The Problem" "The Scope of this Report". Under the heading "Background" you have the sub-headings "Product development" and "Customer relations".

The Table of Contents will also list the Appendices used in the report. These are not numbered like the rest of the report, but each document is labeled "A"/ "B"/ "C" etc. Some appendix documents have more than one page, so each page within the document would be labeled A1/A2/ A3 etc.

WRITING EACH SECTION OF THE REPORT

The Introduction
This is the reader's first glance at the problem to be tackled in the report, context or background of that problem, and the scope and limitations of the report. The introduction "sets the stage" for the rest of the report, and leads the reader into the Discussion or Body of the report. The introduction usually contains the background to the problem, the problem to be discussed in the report, and finally, the scope and the limitations of the data. Usually time, manpower, and financial considerations are discussed as limitations of the report.

The Discussion
In this section the reader is given details about the method of research used and the information gathered through that method. This is usually the longest and most complex part of the report, as it contains all of the data which will lead to the conclusions and recommendations of the report. It is essential, therefore that this section be well organized.

If data has been gathered over time (as in a series of experiments), the data can be organized *chronologically*. If the data *compares* two or more types of material, products or processes, then a parallel construction must be used in which the same characteristics and criteria are applied to each of the elements to be compared. If the *causes and effects* of an event are to be analyzed, then causes and effects should be discussed separately and clearly labeled. Similarly, if the report contains *an analysis of a process* that needs modification, the process itself should be clearly explained, and then alternate methods of modification, each with its own merits and weaknesses, should be discussed.

After all the relevant data has been presented to the reader, there usually follows some discussion of possible solutions to the problem presented in the introduction to the report. It is always a good idea to present at least two or three alternative solutions to the problem, and a discussion of the merits and weaknesses of each. This shows that your final recommendation is based on a reasoned response to alternative courses of action.

The Conclusions
This section is often used as a summary of the Discussion, which reminds the reader of the main findings from the research, and the main merits and weaknesses of the possible solutions. It paves the way for the recommendations.

The Recommendations
This section clearly states which alternative solution you (and your team of researchers) prefer and gives the reader the reasons for your choice. Here you can make reference again to the scope and limitations of your report, and to specifics about your company's situation that make your choice the best.

Appendices
These come at the end of the report, and are usually detailed research materials that were referred to in the Discussion section. They may include lengthy tables of readings, or theoretical references or explanatory materials such as definitions of technical terms or explanations of theories that have been applied in the report. They are labelled "Appendix A"; "Appendix B" etc, according to the order in which they are referred to in the report. They usually have a subtitle which indicates their contents.

Tables & Charts
Tables and Charts that are summaries of research data or Figures that are representations of equipment which is integral to the discussion portion of the report should be placed in the Discussion Section and not in the Appendices. Charts, Tables and Graphs that are not immediately relevant to the discussion, or that are too detailed to be placed in the Discussion Section are placed in the Appendices and referred to but not reproduced in the Discussion Section. Tables and Charts should be labelled with a Table Number, and a Title that identifies the contents. You should also explain significant points which are illustrated by the Chart in the Discussion.

> Ex. Figure 6: A Sketch Map of Western University

Bibliography
This is a list of reference materials and outside sources that were used in the report. For the format of your Bibliography, see your professor to find out which style he/she prefers. For some examples of Bibliographical format, there are library handouts, and references listed below.

MAKING YOUR REPORT LOOK PROFESSIONAL

Your report may contain all the information that the company needs to make a decision, and still not impress your instructor (or your boss). Your report must look like it is well organized and well structured. Some of the things that you need to take care with are listed below:

Headings/ Sub-Headings
Headings help the reader quickly grasp how the material is structured, and what information is contained in the report. Therefore it is essential that your headings clearly indicate what is contained in the section referred to. It is also a convention that all headings be parallel. In other words, they must all be nouns, or questions, or gerunds. Ex. Look back at the headings contained in this handout: how are they the same?

Sub-headings are divisions within the headings. These too must follow a parallel pattern, and must indicate clearly what the sub-section is about. Which are the sub-headings in this section of the handout? How do they differ from the headings in form and content? Can you think of any time when sub-divisions of a report might be further divided? What would you do about these sub-divided headings?

Title Page
The Title Page tells the reader the title of the report, the authors of the report, the date and who the report is for. It is not numbered but it counts as page #1. The organization of this page may vary from professor to professor, or from company to company.