

## REPORT WRITING – A QUICK GUIDE

### What is a report?

A report is a formal, structured piece of writing that usually presents the findings of some research, an enquiry or an information gathering process.

Reports are often thought of as being mainly scientific and technical, but they can be produced in any subject area, for example to give the results of a survey in the social sciences, or to describe a review of the literature in an arts topic.

### How to structure a report

You are likely to find that different University departments or organisations have their own preferred structure and format for reports. For example in industry, firms often issue series of reports which all have a common format. It is vital that you check with your tutor to find out how your report should be structured and presented.

As general guidance, reports are usually arranged in sections, each with a clear heading. A simple report is likely to include at least the following:

- Introduction, including aims and objectives
- Methodology
- Findings/results
- Discussion
- Conclusions and recommendations
- References

More complex reports (not covered in detail in this leaflet) may have these sections:

### Preliminaries

- Title page
- Terms of reference, including scope of report
- Contents
- List of tables and diagrams
- Acknowledgements, i.e. thanks to those who helped with the report
- Summary, i.e. key points of the report

### Main part

- Introduction
- Methodology
- Findings/results
- Discussion
- Conclusions and recommendations

## Supplementaries

- References/bibliography
- Appendices
- Glossary

## Numbering Sections

The main sections of a report can be numbered, and can have sub-sections with sub-headings, which are also numbered. These correspond roughly to paragraphs in an essay.

You will often see reports where the main sections are given single numbers – 1, 2, 3 and so on and the sub-sections are given a decimal number – 1.1, 1.2, 1.3 and so on. Sub-sections can be further divided into – 1.1.1, 1.1.2, 1.1.3 and so on. For example:

1. Introduction
  - 1.1. Aims and objectives
  - 1.2. Hypothesis
2. Methodology
  - 2.1. The survey
    - 2.1.1. The questionnaire
    - 2.1.2. The sample

## The sections of a simple report

### *Introduction*

Say what your research/project/enquiry is about. What are you writing about, why and for whom? What are your objectives? What are you trying to show or prove (your hypothesis)?

### *Methodology*

Say how you did your research/enquiry and the methods you used. How did you collect your data? For example, if you conducted a survey, say how many people were included and how you selected them. Say whether you used interviews or questionnaires and how you analysed the data.

### *Findings/results*

Give the results of your research. Do not, at this stage, try to interpret the results – simply report them. This section may include graphs, charts, diagrams etc. (clearly 3 labelled). Be very careful about copyright if you are using published charts, tables, illustrations etc.

### Discussion

Interpret your findings. What do they show? Were they what you expected? Could your research have been done in a better way?

### Conclusions and recommendations

These should follow on logically from the Findings and Discussion sections. Summarise the key points of your findings and show whether they prove or disprove your hypothesis. If you have been asked to, you can make recommendations arising from your research.

### References

List all your sources in alphabetical order, using the Grimsby Institute Group's Definitive Guide to Harvard Referencing and Bibliographies available at

<http://www.grimsby.ac.uk/highereducation/documents/quality/skills/DefinitiveGuideToHarvardReferencingAndBibliographies.pdf>

### Writing style for reports

The style of reports should be concise, giving precise detail. Flowery language should **not** be used. Data may be presented as charts, graphs or tables, if appropriate. Descriptions of methodology should be sufficiently clear and detailed to allow someone else to replicate them exactly.

### Using the Passive Voice

Scientific reports tend to be written in what is called the passive voice, which is more formal. For example, "The experiment would have been better if ....", rather than "I could have improved the experiment by ....". Similarly, "It is recommended that...." rather than "I recommend....". This is because a scientific report is intended to be objective and based on the analysis of data, rather than subjective and based on personal views and opinions.

However, many leading scientists (including the Astronomer Royal, Sir Martin Rees) are encouraging a return to the active voice where appropriate. If you are unsure about this, you should ask your tutor.