

STRUCTURE OF REPORTS

A key feature of reports is that they are formally structured in sections. The use of sections makes it easy for the reader to jump straight to the information they need.

Unlike an essay which is written in a single narrative style from start to finish, each section of a report has its own purpose and will need to be written in an appropriate style to suit – for example, the methods and results sections are mainly descriptive, whereas the discussion section needs to be analytical.

Understanding the function of each section will help you to structure your information and use the correct writing style. Reports for different briefs require different sections, so always check carefully any instructions you've been given.

Title

The title needs to concisely state the topic of the report. It needs to be informative and descriptive so that someone just reading the title will understand the main issue of your report. You don't need to include excessive detail in your title but avoid being vague and too general.

Abstract

(Also called the Summary or Executive Summary)

This is the 'shop window' for your report. It is the first (and sometimes the only) section to be read and should be the last to be written. It should enable the reader to make an informed decision about whether they want to read the whole report. The length will depend on the extent of the work reported but it is usually a paragraph or two and always less than a page.

A good way to write an abstract is to think of it as a series of brief answers to questions. These would probably include:

- What is the purpose of the work?
- What methods did you use for your research?
- What were the main findings and conclusions reached as a result of your research?
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Introduction

(Also called Background or Context)

In this section you explain the rationale for undertaking the work reported on, including what you have been asked (or chosen) to do, the reasons for doing it and the background to the study. It should be written in an explanatory style.

State what the report is about - what is the question you are trying to answer? If it is a brief for a specific reader (e.g. a feasibility report on a construction project for a client), say who they are. Describe your starting point and the background to the subject, for instance: what research has already been done (if you have been asked to include a Literature Survey later in the report, you only need a brief outline of previous research in the Introduction); what are the relevant themes and issues; why are you being asked to investigate it now?

Explain how you are going to go about responding to the brief. If you are going to test a hypothesis in your research, include this at the end of your introduction. Include a brief outline of your method of enquiry. State the limits of your research and reasons for them, for example; "Research will focus on native English speakers only, as a proper consideration of the issues arising from speaking English as a second language is beyond the scope of this project".

Literature survey

(Also called Literature Review or Survey/Review of Research)

This is a survey of publications (books, journals, authoritative websites, sometimes conference papers) reporting work that has already been done on the topic of your report. It should only include studies that have direct relevance to your research.

A literature survey should be written like an essay in a discursive style, with an introduction, main discussion grouped in themes and a conclusion. Introduce your review by explaining how you went about finding your materials, and any clear trends in research that have emerged. Group your texts in themes. Write about each theme as a separate section, giving a critical summary of each piece of work and showing its relevance to your research.

Conclude with how the review has informed your research (things you'll be building on, gaps you'll be filling etc).

Methods

(Also called Methodology)

You need to write your Methods section in such a way that a reader could replicate the research you have done. There should be no ambiguity here, so you need to write in a very factual informative style.

You need to state clearly how you carried out your investigation. Explain why you chose this particular method (questionnaires, focus group, experimental procedure etc), include techniques and any equipment you used. If there were participants in your research, who were they? How many? How were they selected?

Write this section concisely but thoroughly – go through what you did step by step, including everything that is relevant. You know what you did, but could a reader follow your description?

Results

(Also called Data or Findings)

This section has only one job which is to present the findings of your research as simply and clearly as possible. Use the format that will achieve this most effectively e.g. text, graphs, tables or diagrams.

When deciding on a graphical format to use, think about how the data will look to the reader. Choose just one format - don't repeat the same information in, for instance, a graph and a table. Label your graphs and tables clearly. Give each figure a title and describe in words what the figure demonstrates. Writing in this section should be clear, factual and informative. Save your interpretation of the results for the Discussion section.

Discussion

This is probably the longest section and worth spending time on. It brings everything together, showing how your findings respond to the brief you explained in your introduction and the previous research you surveyed in your literature survey. It should be written in a discursive style, meaning you need to discuss not only what your findings show but why they show this, using evidence from previous research to back up your explanations.

This is also the place to mention if there were any problems (for instance, if your results were different from expectations, you couldn't find important data, or you had to change your method or participants) and how they were or could have been solved.

Conclusion

Your conclusions should be a short section with no new arguments or evidence. Sum up the main points of your research - how do they answer the original brief for the work reported on?

This section may also include:

- Recommendations for action
- Suggestions for further research

References

(Also called Reference List or Bibliography)

List here full details for any works you have referred to in the report, including books, journals, websites and other materials. You may also need to list works you have used in preparing your report but have not explicitly referred to - check your instructions for this and for the correct style of referencing to use.

You can find information about how to reference more unusual materials (television programmes, blogs etc) from various websites including the LearnHigher website on referencing. If you're not sure, the rule is to be consistent and to give enough details that a reader can find the same piece of information that you used.

Appendices

The appendices hold any additional information that may help the reader but is not essential to the report's main findings: anything that 'adds value'. That might include (for instance) interview questions, raw data or a glossary of terms used. Label all appendices and refer to them where appropriate in the main text (e.g. 'See Appendix A for an example questionnaire').

Which section should I write first?

It can be helpful to write up sections as you go along. This means that you write about what you've done while it's still fresh in your mind and you can see more easily if there are any gaps that might need additional research to fill them. In addition, you don't end up with a large piece of writing to do in one go - that can be overwhelming.

Here is a suggested order for writing the main sections:

1. **Methods and Data/Results:** As a rough guide, the more factual the section, the earlier you should write it. So sections describing 'what you did and what you found' are likely to be written first.
2. **Introduction and Literature Survey:** Sections that explain or expand on the purpose of the research should be next. What questions are you seeking to answer, how did they arise, why are they worth investigating? These will help you to see how to interpret and analyse your findings.
3. **Discussion:** Once you've established the questions your research is seeking to answer, you will be able to see how your results contribute to the answers and what kind of answers they point to. Write this early enough that you still have time to fill any gaps you find.
4. **Conclusions and Recommendations:** These should follow logically from your Discussion. They should state your conclusions and recommendations clearly and simply.
5. **Abstract/Executive Summary:** Once the main body is finished you can write a succinct and accurate summary of the main features.

My report doesn't seem to fit into these sections

If you haven't been given instructions on how to structure your report, look at examples of other reports in your discipline. Your department may have examples of past report writing assignments that you can see. Or try the [UniLearning website](#) which has a useful guide to features of reports in various disciplines.

For some reports, (often business or management reports) it isn't appropriate to use the 'introduction, methods, results, discussion, conclusion' model. Instead, you have to create appropriate sub-headings depending on the brief you have been given.

All reports aim to inform the reader about a specific investigation so you need to select the best headings to lead the reader through the different stages of this investigation. Read your brief carefully, brainstorm what you need to include, then group similar ideas together; see if these groups would make logical sub-headings.

You are given the following brief:

'Select a particular job in your chosen field and research what the role involves, what the career prospects are, which companies hire for this role and what skills are required.'

How would you structure this report?

A possible structure could be:

1. Introduction: Background to the role, brief description of what the job involves and how to find information about it.
2. Job description and skills: Detailed description of the responsibilities of the role and the skills required.
3. Relevant employers: Which companies hire for this role and what they are looking for.
4. Career prospects: What other jobs might this role lead onto, what is the job market like for this role?
5. Conclusion: What this research has shown about the best ways of becoming employed in this role.