LEARNING DEVELOPMENT WITH PLYMOUTH UNIVERSITY

Writing reports

Abstract/Summary:

This study guide outlines some general principles of report writing. The abstract tells a reader what they are going to be told, in outline, unpacking a succinct and specific title. It gives the reader a clear idea of what to expect from the start, and of whether the document is worth reading in full (Turner *et al*., 2010). As well as describing the processes involved in report writing, this guide is presented and formatted in the style of a report to serve as a possible model (Wilson, 1996). In other words, this is a report showing how to write reports. It identifies what a report is, what different types there are and what purposes they serve. It then offers some guidelines on how to write one, outlining steps such as researching, planning and presenting a report as well as offering some discussion of challenges in report-writing. It finishes with a checklist for writing a good report.

Contents:

1. Introduction: the nature and function of a report

This section will sometimes be called ‘background’ or ‘context’. In all cases it should introduce the topic or problem and any key information required to ‘set the scene’ for your reader, including defining terms and scope. (See our study guide on essay writing for more advice on writing a good introduction.)

1.1 The nature of a report

A written report is a document that presents specific information as accurately and as concisely as possible to a particular audience. Reports are often used to communicate the results of a project or investigation to, for example, an employer or other critical reader who might be looking for specific information. Like an essay, it will probably have one or more key messages for the reader based on the research or procedure reported on. Normal referencing principles apply, though the writing style and presentation will differ from those of an essay.

1.2 The function of a report

There are a number of reasons for writing a report, including one or more of:

- providing a record of an event or meeting;
- aiding decision-making;
- persuading or influencing an audience;
- setting out procedures.

1.3 Types of report:

Different disciplines use different types of report, such as those outlined by Unilearning (2000):

- *Technical* and *business* reports often simulate the process of report writing in industry, where a problem or a case study is addressed and resolved for the benefit of an imaginary client.
- *Field* reports are common in disciplines such as law (e.g. a Court observation), industrial relations, psychology (e.g. a child development report), nursing (e.g. a patient's history), history (e.g. a site report) and education (e.g. a teaching observation), where observations of phenomena or events in the real world might be analysed using theories studied in the course.
- *Scientific* reports (also called *laboratory* reports) are common in all the sciences. They use a standard format describing methods, results and conclusions to report on an experiment or other empirical investigation.

2. Literature review: reading matter to contextualise and help you develop ideas

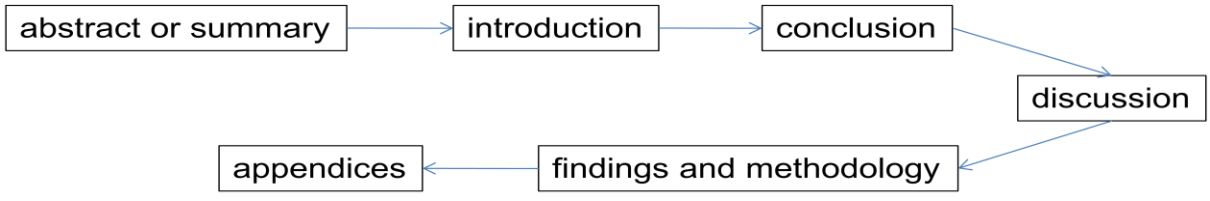
As with any project, the first step is to understand the task you've been given. Then once you have understood the brief, you can begin researching the topic. Aim to find material from a variety of sources according to your subject and purpose. Sources include material available in the library and online, such as books, journals, websites, archives, newspapers and other written and non-written sources, including previous reports, minutes of meetings, broadcasts etc. Methods of collecting primary research material can include interviews, questionnaires, brainstorming sessions, focus groups and meetings.

The main purpose of the literature review is to map the work already done by others on your topic. This is like a mini essay, with an introduction to the main issue(s), a main body and a conclusion (Turner *et al*., 2010). You can organise this section by grouping sources into themes in order to outline trends in the field. Turner *et al*., recommend summarising others' work critically, showing how it relates to your research, and concluding with how this reading has informed your research in terms of 'things you'll be building on, gaps you'll be filling etc.' (*ibid*.).

3. Planning: purpose and structure

As with an essay, you will only be able to determine the structure when you've identified your key message. Having established the type and purpose of your report, you need to plan before you begin writing. Reports are generally more formally structured than essays, so as well as identifying and organising the main themes/subtopics, you will need to rationalise these into sections such as in this guide. Bear in mind that although a marker will read your entire report, other readers wouldn't necessarily do so, perhaps just reading the abstract, findings and/or conclusion instead.

Figure 1: the order in which people tend to read reports (Turner *et al*., 2010)



Knowing how people commonly read a report can help you consider how to influence your reader's experience of your report, i.e. where to put the most important or interesting material and so on.

4. Method: writing and presenting the report

It is generally advised that this section should be written very clearly, simply and factually for your reader so that they could exactly replicate the procedure you describe. As well as explaining how you did it, what materials and equipment you used, who was involved and how and so on (whilst maintaining confidentiality in most cases), you also need to justify why you did each bit the way you did. It is also important to comment on anything you did differently from the method you first planned (Unilearning, 2000).

4.1 Language

The kind of language used in the report will depend upon the reader. Always aim to use the most appropriate word for context; be specific with words and phrases; use language that is straightforward; keep sentences and paragraphs reasonably short; use humour only when appropriate (very rarely); be objective; and be sensitive to issues of inclusivity around, for example, gender, age, ability, race, sexuality and religion.

4.2 Presentation and layout

Reports, unlike most essays, will be broken down into small numbered sections much like this one. Like essays, they should be presented using at least 11 or 12 point font size with 1.5 or double spacing. Don't use a range of typefaces and font sizes; choose one that is clear and easy to read, for example, Times New Roman or Arial. To emphasise a word, phrase or heading, use CAPITALS, **bold**, *italics*, and/or underlining; whichever style you use, be consistent. Headings, sub-headings and numbering can be very effective in presenting the main points and make it easier for the reader to follow the sections.

5. Results/findings and presenting them visually

Turner *et al*., (2010) suggest that 'this section has only one job, which is to present the findings of your research as simply and clearly as possible'. She goes on to recommend that you 'use the format that will achieve this most effectively: e.g. text, graphs, tables or diagrams. For ideas on how to present information graphically, see either http://www.visual-literacy.org/periodic_table/periodic_table.html and/or http://www.learnhigher.ac.uk/learningareas/reportwriting/graphicaldata.htm. All of these must be properly referenced in the same way as other material (for more information on referencing, see your programme handbook and the latest edition of Pears and Shields' *Cite them right*).

6. Discussion/analysis:

This section is also like a mini essay in structure and style, exploring the issues in some depth. It is your opportunity to show off your thinking skills as you discuss any problems encountered, analyse the implications of the findings, evaluate pros and cons, and examine the key themes in more detail. This section will usually be the longest section of text and your marker may pay special attention to it.

7. Conclusion and recommendations

This section sums up the implications of the findings as discussed above, identifying the main issues brought to light by your research (Turner *et al*., 2010), how these relate to the original brief (*ibid*.), and what further work, research or action you would recommend, and the reasons for this.

So a good report does as outlined in this text, but there are a number of reasons why a report may not achieve well. It may fail to respond to the brief (Turner *et al*., 2010), which is perhaps the most fundamental flaw. It may be mistargeted, with a lack of purpose, inappropriate scope, or too much or too little material (*ibid*.). It may not relate the results to the purpose (*ibid*.). All of these may be due to misunderstanding of the brief or topic and/or may reveal a lack of knowledge or critical thought of the subject (see Critical Thinking for help with developing and organising your ideas).

Building a clear structure will help your reader and also reflect well on your thinking, planning and focus. Avoid overly subjective language so as not to show inappropriate bias. A consistent style should reflect your consistent approach to the whole project and help reassure your reader of its validity. Good spelling and grammar and the avoidance of exclusive jargon are important because they too will help raise your reader's confidence in your work.

So, Turner *et al* (*ibid*.) sum up report writing in one sentence: 'This is what was done, and this is what it means.'

Reference list

Burns, T. and Sinfield, S. (2008) *Essential study skills: the complete guide to success at university* (2nd ed.). London: Sage

Pears, R. and Shields, G. (2008) *Cite them right: the essential referencing guide.* Newcastle upon Tyne: Pear Tree Books.

Turner, J., Shahabudin, K. and Reid, M. (2009) *Better report writing for university students*. Available at: http://www.learnhigher.ac.uk/learningareas/reportwriting/betterreportwriting.htm (Accessed: 9th June 2010)

Unilearning (2000) *Report writing*. Available at: http://unilearning.uow.edu.au/report/index.html (Accessed: 9th June 2010)

Wilson, J. (1996) *Report writing for business students*. Preston: University of Central Lancashire

Appendix

Checklist for a good report (adapted from Burns and Sinfield, 2008)

1. What is the purpose of this report, and has it fulfilled that clearly?
2. Are your ideas presented logically so that your reader can follow and get sufficient information to make the decisions you hope for? Is there enough accurate, relevant material, or too much?
3. Does it cover the key points? Do you analyse your evidence/data to support your points?
4. Does your conclusion follow logically from your arguments, and do your recommendations follow logically from your conclusions?
5. Are the language, tone, style and pitch clear, direct and formal, suitable for the reader and the subject?
6. Is the grammar, punctuation and spelling correct? Is the report the correct length?
7. Is the layout simple, clear, logical and consistent, with conventional sections, headings, labels and numbers? Is the right material in the right sections?
8. If illustrations such as figures and tables have been included, are they clear and purposeful, usefully integrated and properly referenced?
9. Have you used an appropriate number and range of sources? Have all sources and references been acknowledged, in the main body and at the end in a list of references?
10. Should there be a glossary? If there is one, is it comprehensive?
11. Are the appendices clearly labelled? Is the reader directed to each appendix in the body of the report?
12. Have you left the report on one side for a while before going back to review and edit it?