

Generic Reports

There are many different kinds of “reports”: empirical (or scientific) reports, case study reports, lab reports, engineering reports, business (or corporate) reports. They all have their own specific requirements. There are common elements too—which is why they are all called “reports”. This helpsheet outlines a generic, discipline non-specific report format which is suitable for a range of contexts, e.g., when your lecturer asks you to “write a report” and they are not specific about the kind of report required.

Structure

In terms of structure, a generic report is similar to an essay with a few notable differences:

- *Introduction* (5-10 percent of content: background to issue, statement of aim, outline of report);
- *Body* (80-90 percent of content: divided into Findings and Discussion);
- *Conclusion* (5-10 percent of content: summary of report and deductions from Discussion).

However, a generic report also includes an *Abstract* (100-200 words) that is separate from, and occurring prior to, the Introduction (and on a separate page); a *Table of Contents*; a *Recommendations* section; and an optional *Appendices* section at the end of the report. (This is placed after the *Reference List/Bibliography*.) The body of a generic report is typically divided into the following sections:

- *Findings*: This is a summary of factual information discovered in the course of your investigations or research.
- *Discussion* (or “Analysis”): This is a careful evaluation of the data presented in the Findings. The method of evaluation very much depends on this discipline (ask your lecturer or an LSA for advice).
- *Recommendations*: This is a list of what you think should be done to correct a problem or overcome the issue outlined in the Introduction.

Sometimes a *Literature Review* is incorporated before the Findings section.

You can think of the main parts of the report like this:

- *Findings*: what you found
- *Discussion*: What you *think* about what you found
- *Recommendations*: What you want *done* based on what you found.

Report Language

Reports always adopt formal expression. First person pronouns and phrases in the first person (“I think ...”, “In my view ...”) are rarely used:

- *I argue* that *there* has been a rise in shareholder value ... (first person—avoid this)
- *It is argued* that there has been a rise in shareholder value ... (third person—preferred)

The active voice is also down-played. The active voice is when the *subject* of a sentence does the action indicated by the *verb* in the sentence. The passive voice is when the subject is the object being acted on in the sentence. For example:

- A quarter of all applicants **failed** the Law admission exam (active)
- The law admission exam **was failed** by a quarter of all applicants (passive)

While important, the use of these formal writing conventions can make for stilted, abstract-sounding, and monotonous writing. It is important that you make your position clear in a report, especially in the **Discussion** section. Therefore, whilst it is generally important to avoid first person, active sentences in most parts of a report, sometimes these are unavoidable. Common sense should be used. Which sentence below is best in terms of clearly outlining the report author's position?

- The preferences given by investors to current portfolio acquisitions over older stocks *were reported to be even* across the sector.
- *Our research has shown that* investors prefer current portfolio acquisitions over older stocks, and this is even across the sector.

Report Style

The style of report writing is clear and business-like. Adopt the fiction of being a consultant in a company pitching your report to meet a corporate client. Avoid:

- Idiom and slang;
- Contractions (don't, won't, can't, and so on);
- Abbreviations (e.g., etc.) and unexplained acronyms;
- Strong expressions of opinion and attitude (be cautious in what you claim and make sure your claims are backed-up with evidence and/or argument);
- Excessive description (make your point, back it up and move on).

In report writing the following are permitted:

- Diagrams, charts and tables of all kinds
- Suitably introduced bullet pointed lists. (Make sure they are not merely lists with no surrounding contextual explanation);
- Cross references to other sections (e.g., Appendices)
- Non-scholarly literature may be used as long as references to peer-reviewed, scholarly literature are also included.

