



REPORT WRITING

a guide to organisation and style

by

David Rudd

Course: B.A (Hons) Yr II, University of Bolton

Tutor: Dr A. N. Other, Dept of Life

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SUMMARY

This report attempts to show by example how a report should be organised. The major component parts are discussed and there is a short section on style.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This booklet has been written in response to requests from students who wanted an example of how a report should be laid out. It covers the organisation of a report, indicating areas where confusion often occurs (as between a summary and introduction), and issues of style. It does not give any information on the planning of a report, on the sources of information, nor on how to collect evidence

2. WRITING A REPORT

2.1 ORGANISATION

The purpose of a report is to inform the reader. It is helpful, both to the reader and to the writer, if the report is logically organised. Over the years a standard format for reports has been worked out. Although there may be circumstances when it is advisable to change the format to fit a particular need, following the format ensures that all the essential information is included and that it is treated in a logical way. The format usually adopted is that described in a British Standard (1972). The standard components of a report are as follows: Title; Summary; List of contents; Introduction; Main body of the report; Conclusions; Recommendations; Appendix; References.

2.1.1 The Title

The title is your readers' first contact with the report. Its aim is to inform them of the report's contents. It should be brief, but it must contain enough information to distinguish it from other, similar reports. Try to write it using ordinary English grammar, rather than the 'headline' style that is sometimes adopted; for example, a good title might be *A comparative survey of computer programs for business using the PC* rather than *PC business program comparison survey*.

2.1.2 The Summary or Abstract

The purpose of the summary is to give a brief overview of the whole report, not just of the conclusions and recommendations. Although it is placed immediately after the title, it is written last, after the rest of the report has been completed. It is not necessary to give detailed information in the summary - it is sufficient to give an indication of the kind of information that can be found in the report. For a short report, a summary of about 100-150 words is enough; for a major research report, a summary may be as long as one page. It certainly should not be longer than this. As a general rule, the shorter the summary, the better, as long

as the essential information is included. Although it must be brief, the summary should be written in complete sentences, not as notes.

2.1.3 The List of Contents

The list of contents is there to help your reader find specific information in the report quickly. It is usual to present it as a list of headings with corresponding page numbers. In a long report, or if the material is complex, it is helpful to split the report into sections which are also presented in the list of contents. The sections should be given informative subheadings that should be chosen with as much care as the main title of the report.

2.1.4 The Introduction

The purpose of the introduction is to set the scene for your readers so that they know what to expect from the report. It is important to remember that the introduction introduces the report. It does not introduce the subject. You should leave any material facts until the main body of the report.

The introduction answers the questions:

- Why is the report being written?
- What kinds of information does it contain?
- How is the problem being approached?
- For whom is the report being written?

2.1.4.1 *Why is the report being written?*

It is important to set out your brief for the report. You need to give the circumstances which made the report necessary and what you hope to achieve by writing it. It may be necessary to give some background information so that there is a framework into which your readers can fit the information you are presenting. Of course, you need to use your judgement to decide how much detail to include, and this will largely depend on your assessment of the people who will be reading the report.

2.1.4.2 *What kind of information does it contain?*

You need to give an indication of the subject matter which you are dealing with. It is often helpful to give the scope of the information as well. For example, you could say how detailed or technical the information is going to be. You might need to say what kinds of information you are not going to deal with.

2.1.4.3 *How is the problem being approached?*

You need to say whether you are dealing with the problem from a theoretical or practical standpoint. Give an outline of the methods you used in your investigations.

2.1.4.4 *For whom is the report being written?*

It is helpful to state whether you are writing for a technical or general reader - or any other particular group. This will help your potential readers to decide whether it is worthwhile reading the report. It will also help you to judge the style, language and degree of difficulty to use in writing the report.

2.1.5 **The main body of the report**

This is where the real content of the report is presented. It should be given its own title, which describes the subject matter. It is usual to present the material in two sections: 'Methods and materials' and 'Findings' (or 'Evidence').

2.1.5.1 *Methods and materials*

This section answers the questions 'What did I do?', 'How did I do it?', and 'What did I do it with?'

In a research report, or one based on experiments, this section can be substantial. For other kinds of report, it can be much shorter. Its purpose is to enable someone else to repeat what you have done and to check that what you have done is valid, so there must be enough information for them to do so. On the other hand, there is no need to give detailed descriptions of standard equipment or techniques. It is sufficient to refer to procedures by name. If you have modified a piece of equipment or a technique in any way, then you must explain what you have done.

2.1.5.2 *Findings*

This is the place where you present your evidence. It should be organised logically so that your conclusions arise naturally from the facts you have written. It is important to confine yourself to proven facts here and to resist the temptation to indulge in personal views. It is sometimes helpful to use tables, diagrams or graphs to make your information more easily understood.

Always ask yourself if all the detail you have given is necessary to understand the main argument. If it is, then present it within the text. If it is not, then the tables, graphs and so on may be better placed in an

appendix. Do make sure that graphs and diagrams are well constructed and labelled so that they do, in fact, make the information easier to understand. A badly constructed diagram or graph can make the information more confusing.

Another point to remember is that it is not enough simply to present a graph or table and expect your reader to pick out what is important. It is your job to show the reader what the main facts are and how they relate to the subject you are presenting. You must, therefore, include some discussion of the facts.

2.1.6 **The Conclusions**

The conclusions should arise naturally from the evidence that is presented in the previous sections. You might include, for example, statements on what has happened, what the situation is and what might happen. You might also consider further action that could be taken, and an analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of various courses of action. If appropriate, you should give your opinion, in the light of your experience and the evidence that you have presented, what a preferred course of action would be. If there are any gaps in your knowledge which prevent you coming to a decision, then you should make that clear and perhaps outline what further investigations would be necessary to provide fuller information. You should not include any new information that does not appear in the main body of the report. You should not make statements that you cannot support from the evidence.

2.1.7 **The Recommendations**

Recommendations are not always called for in a report, but if they are included, they should follow on logically from the conclusions. Usually a brief statement of what should or should not be done is sufficient. It helps the reader if the recommendations are set out as brief statements.

2.1.8 **The Appendix**

The appendix contains peripheral matter which would overload your main argument. Some of the kinds of material that can be included are considered below.

2.1.8.1 *Glossary*

If you are presenting a technical report to people who are not experts in the subject, it is sometimes helpful to provide explanations of the technical terms you are using. The neatest way to do this is to provide a glossary in the Appendix. You list, in alphabetical order, the terms you have used with a brief definition of their meaning.

2.1.8.2 *Tables*

When you have to present a large amount of statistical data, it is sometimes more convenient to collect it together in the Appendix. If you do so, then it is most important to give informative titles to your tables and to ensure that they are presented in the order in which they are referred to in the text.

2.1.8.3 *Diagrams and illustrations*

It is quite acceptable to present diagrams and illustrations within the main body of the report. Sometimes, however, you may feel that they would split up the text too much, or that they would interfere with the main thrust of the argument. In that case, they may be presented in the Appendix.

2.1.8.4 *Texts*

If it is relevant, you can add texts of questionnaires, specification sheets and so on.

2.1.9 **References**

If you have consulted printed, or other media sources (e.g. books, journals, videos) to help you compile your report, then you *must* give a list of your references. There are a number of ways of doing this, but the most commonly accepted method is the Harvard system (BS 5605, 1990). Details of this are listed in Rudd (2005). Basically, after the citation in the text, all items are listed in alphabetical order of author's surname in a Bibliography at the end. It is important that a full reference is given.

For a book: the author's surname with at least the initials of the first name and preferably the full first name; the date of publication; the full title of the book; the edition - if other than the first; the place of publication; and the publisher.

For a journal article: the author's surname with the initials of the first name, or preferably, the full first name; the date of the journal; the full title of the article; the number and part number of the journal; the page numbers on which the article can be found.

For electronic and other forms of information, see Rudd (2005) for detail.

2.2 **STYLE**

2.2.1 **Written Style**

Gowers (1973) says that the purpose of good style is to affect the reader in precisely the way that you intend. Style, in this sense, is not intended to mean the kind of heightened language you would find in poetry. Good style simply means choosing ways of expressing yourself that will communicate your ideas clearly. Style is, therefore, a matter of good manners – of putting yourself in your readers' place so that you do not make unnecessary demands on them. Your readers should not have to struggle to make out the meaning of what you write. Gowers (1973) is essential reading on style, but other books on report writing contain useful information; e.g. Cooper (1984), Elsenberg (1982), Fletcher (1983), Sussams (1983), Van Emden and Easteal (1987) and Wainwright (1984). The elements of style can be summed up very simply: be brief; be clear; be human.

2.2.1.1 *Be brief*

Use no more words than are necessary to express what you mean. It is sometimes tempting to choose a roundabout way of saying something because an unadorned statement may seem too naked. Try to remember that you are wasting your own, your company's and your reader's time, if you use too many words. While it may sometimes be tactful to dress up unpalatable facts in a cloak of excess words, most technical writing demands that you make your point as concisely as possible. Here are a few examples of how very wordy statements can be pruned:

- i) It is of importance to bear in mind the fact that the Minister's views in this connection, which were indicated at the meeting, were that it was a matter of prime importance that Local Authorities appreciate that information concerning possible breaches of the Regulations should be communicated to the investigating officers of the Ministry without undue delay. (57 words)

This could be rewritten:

The Minister said that it was important that Local Authorities told his Ministry as quickly as possible if the Regulations were broken. (22 words)

- ii) It is in any case important that senior management should at least involve itself in ensuring the existence of satisfactory

policies and procedures for dealing with recruitment, induction, training and industrial relations. (32 words)

This could be rewritten:

Senior management should ensure that staff are being properly recruited and trained and that there are good industrial relations policies. (20 words)

Try to avoid phrases that add nothing to your meaning or could be replaced by one word; e.g.

| | | |
|---------------------------|---|-------------------|
| due to the fact that | = | because |
| on a daily basis | = | daily |
| of a complex nature | = | complex |
| in a laboratory situation | = | in the laboratory |

Lastly, be particularly wary of sections you are proud of: they are probably too wordy.

2.2.1.2 *Be clear*

Take care to use words which have the precise meaning you intend to convey, and, when you have the choice, choose words which are most easily understood. Avoid words with vague meanings.

It is usually better to use concrete rather than abstract nouns and to use verbs rather than nouns. Doing so will often make your meaning clearer and help you make your point more strongly.

For example:

| | | |
|---|---|---------------------------|
| The train has been subject to delay. | = | The train was delayed. |
| The retention of your receipt is desirable. | = | Please keep your receipt. |

Another common way that writers confuse their readers is by stringing nouns together - a common practice in newspaper headlines, where editors have to make their headlines as eye-catching and brief as possible; e.g. 'Chip shop owner death scandal'. From this we do not know whether the chip shop owner found someone dead, was found dead, killed someone, was killed, or perhaps, was poisoning customers. Generally these ambiguities will be explained in the main text. But some writers use this style as if it were self-explanatory. For instance, see how long it takes to decode the following sentence:

The existing management information system will be upgraded and complemented with a company-wide networked database which will link into the current satellite based intra-Schlumberger packet switching communications system.

Clearly, in subjects that already have compound nouns - like chip resistors, printed circuit boards - it is unfair on your readers to make them do more mental processing.

Lastly, do not invent words! Terms like 'ruggedized' 'exhaustivated', 'componential' – all recently found in reports – do not help you in communicating with your reader.

2.2.1.3 *Be human*

Your readers will find what you write easier to read if they feel that a human being has written the text and that you have understood their needs as human beings. In particular, try to use active rather than passive forms of verbs. For example, compare the following statements:

- i) Performance *has improved*.
- ii) An improvement in performance *has been recorded*.

The first is active: it is short and to the point; the second is passive: it requires more words and ends up saying something less clearly.

However, you may be required to use the passive to avoid using the first person - that is, 'I' and 'We'. Although the first person is far more direct and friendly, in Reports you are generally emphasising what was done; it is seen as less relevant that you, personally, were doing it. Hence, 'I conducted an experiment', not 'An experiment was conducted.'

2.2.2 **Numbering**

In this report, the point numbering system is used (BS 5848, 1980). Main sections are numbered 1, 2, 3 etc., with each sub-section given a decimal subdivision. This can be quite a useful device to help your readers keep track of where they are within the report, especially if you help them by showing the basic shape by using indentations in your contents list. However, this numbering system is not compulsory or even necessary, and it can become unwieldy. In some reports - especially government reports - each paragraph is numbered consecutively. This can be useful, especially in a long report where you may want to refer back to earlier

sections. In a more narrative kind of report, any numbering may be intrusive. As in other aspects of report writing, you need to ask yourself, 'what system is going to be most useful to my readers'? For a schematic guide to different numbering systems, see the appendix.

2.2.3 Other conventions

It is usual to present reports that are typed, double-spaced on one side of the paper only. Remember to leave adequate margins (at least one inch on the left - 25mm - and no less than $\frac{3}{4}$ inch - 20mm - elsewhere). A cramped page is not easy to read and you risk losing some of the text inside the binding if you start too far over to the left. Remember to number your pages so that you can refer to them in your contents list.

Many organisations have their own local 'house rules' for the presentation of reports, so do make sure you keep to the agreed format - which may differ slightly from what you read here.

3 CONCLUSION

It may seem of lot of trouble to set out a report in this formal way, but the technique has grown up because writing in this controlled way helps both the writer and the reader. A framework ensures that report writers include all the relevant information and also helps them set out the information in a logical way. The framework also helps the readers to decide whether the report is going to be relevant and if so helps them to find the information they need fairly quickly.

4 RECOMMENDATIONS

- Plan your report carefully, using the appropriate section headings.
- Follow the guidelines laid out in this booklet, but be aware of any local variations.
- Write, with your readership in mind, as concisely and as clearly as possible.

5 **APPENDIX - Numbering systems in reports**

| Decimal system | Alpha-Numeric systems | Other systems |
|---|---|--|
| 1 MAIN HEADING 1.1 Secondary Heading 1.1.1 Sub-heading 1.1.2 Sub-heading 1.2 Secondary Heading 1.2.1 Sub-heading 1.2.2 Sub-heading 1.2.2.1 Sub-sub-heading | A MAIN HEADING 1 Secondary Heading a) Sub-heading i) Sub-sub-heading | <i>Government Reports</i> - each consecutive paragraph is given an ordinal number, though there are also separate chapter divisions. |
| | 1 MAIN HEADING a) Secondary Heading i) Sub-heading | <i>Open University Course Units</i> - each paragraph is numbered, but using a decimal system, so that paragraphs in chapter 1 run 1.1, 1.2, 1.3 etc. |

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