



Writing reports

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What is a report?

A report is a clearly structured document that presents information about an investigation that you have undertaken. The clear structure allows specific parts of that information to be easily located by the reader.

Different types of reports

There are many different types of reports. At university, however, the most common types of report you may be asked to write are:

- **Analytical reports** which focus on investigations into events, organizations, situations, issues and processes. Their purpose is often to provide the reader with information that can be used to make decisions and take further action. They are common in the social sciences, business courses, and engineering
- **Practical/Scientific reports** which give an account of what has happened in a test situation, a practical session or as part of an experiment. They are common in science-based courses.

Your assessment guidelines should make it clear which type of report is required of you

For information on preparing **Practical/Scientific Reports** see the learning guide Writing practical reports at

<http://www.unisanet.unisa.edu.au/learningconnection/students/Lguides/!9pracrv.doc>

This guide refers specifically to **Analytical Reports**. Note that if there are any apparent contradictions between the advice given here and your assessment guidelines, it is important to follow the assessment requirements. For example, you may be required to include some, but not all, of the sections discussed in this guide.

Sections and stages

The following table shows the most common sections typically contained in the two different types of reports and the various parts or stages making up each section. The headings in a report are used to identify the content of each section and stage.

Table 1: Sections and stages of a report and the headings used

Sections	Stages	Headings	
		Analytical Reports	Practical/Scientific Reports
Preliminary Section - Provides the context and background information		Title Page	Title Page
		Table of Contents	Table of Contents (if required)
		Executive Summary/Abstract	Abstract/Synopsis
Main Section or body of the report - Presents the key aspects of the report: what was done, what was found, what this means	Stage 1 Introduces this section	Introduction	Introduction
	Stage 2 Presents the findings and your analysis of these		(Headings identifying the aspect dealt with in each sub-section)
		Results	
		Stage 3 States the implications of the findings and analysis	Conclusion
	Conclusion		
	Recommendations (if required)		
Supplementary Section – Contains extra information		References/Bibliography	References/Bibliography
		Appendices	Appendices

Your assessment guidelines may also require you to include additional components such as:

- Letter of Transmittal
- Literature Review
- Glossary of terms and abbreviations
- Acknowledgements

Steps for writing analytical reports

Once you have your topic, you should follow a series of steps:

Step 1: Consider both your word count and your time frame

The word count only refers to the *main section* of your report. The Executive Summary,

Letter of Authorisation, Acknowledgements, Glossary, Appendices and Reference

List/Bibliography are not normally included in the word count. Plan in advance how much time you have available to research and complete your report. You may find it helpful to draw up a timeline and set planning goals.

Step 2: Analyse your topic carefully

In analysing your topic, you can ask yourself a series of questions:

- *Who* is the intended audience for the report, and *what* do they want to know? *What* exactly are you required to report about? To help identify what is required, underline or highlight the key words in the topic. These tell you what content to focus on in your research.
- What is the purpose of the report? Some purposes are to record, to inform, to instruct, to analyse or to persuade in relation to a particular issue
- What is the *scope* of your report? What aspects of the topic are you to cover?
- What are the *limits* of the report? There are *three kinds* of ‘limits’ you need to consider here. These include limits to the *information* part of the topic, which confine it to a particular place, time or group. Also, there are limits placed on the *number of words* and the *time* you have available. Sometimes, too, there are limits on the *resources* available.

Step 3: Make an initial plan

To develop your initial plan:

- Brainstorm your ideas. Develop a technique for doing this effectively - for example, by mind mapping or by asking questions such as What? Who? Where? When? How? Why? in relation to your topic
- Select the ideas relevant to the aims of your report and to the questions your reader/s want answered
- Organise these ideas into a preliminary plan, grouping related ideas together into headings and sub-headings

Step 4: Locate your information and take notes

Consider how best to investigate your topic. For example, do you need to draw your information mainly from journal articles or books, etc? Or are you required to prepare and/or conduct a survey or interview with individuals/groups, and then report on your findings? Gather the information you require, keeping in mind the aim and structure of your report. Record the sources of your information, including full bibliographic details, in a systematic way.

Step 5: Prepare the first draft

The main section is usually the best place to start. Once you have written that, you can go on to write the other two sections.

The main section

Suggestions for drafting the various stages of the main section are given below. The order you write these is not necessarily the order given here. Start on the section you feel most confident about writing.

- Stage 1: Introduction

The purpose of the Introduction is to orientate your reader to the whole document, and to give your report a context. You can do this by including:

- a clear statement of purpose – *why* this topic is being investigated
- background to the report – *why* the report was requested and *by whom*
- scope and limits of the report – *what* issues are covered in it, what issues are not covered and why
- the methods of investigation – *how* you investigated this topic

You may also include:

- a brief reference to the *theories* or *ideas* which you intend to discuss in more detail in

your findings. Note that in larger reports these theories and ideas can form a separate section within the main body called the Literature Review

- a definition of any *relevant terms*
- an outline of the *structure* of the report

▪ Stage 2: Presentation of the findings and analysis

Stage 2 is central to your report as it includes both the *presentation* and the *analysis* of your findings. Here you describe *what you found out* from your investigation, and analyse *what those findings mean*. You may find the following suggestions helpful in writing Stage 2:

- Adapt your preliminary plan if necessary to organise your ideas under headings and sub-headings
- Be clear about what points you want to make to report your findings. Put what you consider to be the most important points first, followed by those of lesser importance. Support each of these points with relevant evidence, elaboration or explanation
- Add any diagrams (eg. graphs, tables, figures, etc) to support and present your material visually. Each diagram must have a title, and be numbered consecutively
- Analyse the meaning or significance of your findings. This involves pointing out the findings that most strongly answer the question/s you were investigating. You may relate the findings to the expectations you had, based on theory and the findings of other investigations

▪ Stage 3: Conclusion and Recommendations

The purpose of the Conclusion is to restate in a shortened form the *most significant points* from your investigation and analysis and to make a general statement about the significance of these. This prepares the reader for any recommendations you go on to make. Note that no new information should be included in this section.

The purpose of the Recommendations section is to make suggestions about the action(s) or future direction(s) that should be taken as a result of your conclusions. These should be written in order of priority.

Note that in some reports, the recommendations are presented as part of the Conclusion. This allows any recommended action to follow directly on from the conclusion which it leads from. Check to see which format is required in your report. In either case, all recommendations should follow logically from the conclusions you have made.

The Supplementary section

This comprises additional information that allows the reader to verify your sources and check more detailed data.

▪ Reference List or Bibliography

This contains a list of all the sources you have either used or referred to in your report.

Always check your course online referencing resources at

<http://www.unisanet.unisa.edu.au/learningconnection/students/lrnsvcs/ref.asp>

▪ Appendices

The Appendices contain any supplementary materials you have used to gather your information

such as articles, brochures, statistics, spreadsheets, charts, etc. They are used as Appendices to avoid too much detail in the main section of the report, which could distract from the flow of the discussion. Although they are not inserted into the report itself, it is important that they are referred to in the main section of the report. Each Appendix needs to be labelled and numbered and listed in the Table of Contents.

The Preliminary section

To complete the report for submission, extra information is attached before the main section.

▪ Title Page

In addition to the 'student assignment cover sheet' that you attach to all written assignments, you also need to include an official title page for your report. This page should include:

- the title of the report
- the name of person or organisation for whom the report has been prepared
- your name (or for a group report, the names of all those in the group who prepared the report)
- the date of completion or submission
- the organisation/section/department receiving the report

▪ Table of Contents

The Table of Contents outlines the different sections of the report, and shows the reader where to find them. It contains a list of all the headings, sub-headings, tables/figures, appendices, etc, and their corresponding page numbers. The Table of Contents can be generated electronically using Word.

▪ Executive Summary

An Executive Summary gives the reader a general *overview/summary* of the *whole* report without them having to read the entire document. It should be able to stand alone as a separate document if required. The Executive Summary needs to be written last, because it summarises the information contained in the whole report.

This section usually includes:

- the *background* to the report
- the *purpose* of the report, i.e. an explanation of *why* the report was required
- the *scope* and *limits* of the investigation including brief details of the general procedure, i.e. *what* was investigated, and *how* the investigation was conducted
- the *important findings* or results of the investigation, and the *conclusions* which you drew from the results, i.e. an explanation of *what outcomes* the investigation provided
- *recommendations* for action, if required, i.e. suggestions for *what future action* needs to be taken

Step 6: Evaluate your draft carefully

Once you have completed your first draft check that:

- you have followed the guidelines in your course information booklet. Check particularly the requirements relating to *word length, format, layout, presentation* and *referencing*.
- your writing style is appropriate. Analytical reports are written in a formal style using relatively short sentences
- you have connected your points logically, and used appropriate linking words and phrases
- each paragraph deals with one main idea
- your claims are supported by evidence, using references where appropriate
- your examples are relevant to the points being made
- you have referenced your work appropriately
- your grammar, spelling and punctuation are correct

Additional components

Some reports also require:

Letter of Transmittal

The purpose of a Letter of Transmittal is to acknowledge the completion and handing over of the report. It should include who authorised the study, the terms of reference, a statement about the issues which were investigated as well as their scope and limitations, and a summary of the conclusions and recommendations. This letter is prepared by the person or group who conducts the investigation, and is part of the Preliminary Section.

Literature Review

A Literature review is a critical review of published work related to the topic of the report. This Review is generally only required for lengthy, in-depth studies or investigations into an hypothesis. It forms part of the main section of the report, usually after the Introduction.

Glossary

The Glossary is a list of specific terms and abbreviations used in the report, together with their meanings. If relatively short, and essential for a clear understanding of the report, the Glossary can be placed in the Preliminary Section, otherwise it belongs in the Supplementary Section.

Acknowledgements

The Acknowledgements lists the names of anyone who may have given you valuable assistance in preparing the report. It is generally included in the Preliminary Section after the Title Page.

Presentation

A significant aspect of any report is *the way it is presented*. Check your course information booklet for instructions about how you are expected to do this. The following is a general overview, in terms of sequence and format, of what to consider as you finalise your document prior to presentation:

Sequence

The different sections of your report will generally be put together according to the following sequence (including whatever sections are required in your assignment):

- Title page
- Letter of transmittal
- Acknowledgements
- Table of contents
- Executive summary
- Introduction
- Presentation of information (the findings) and analysis
- Conclusion
- Recommendations
- Reference List
- Glossary
- Appendices

Format

Use a clear and consistent system to enable the reader to readily identify the stages of your report. Common systems include headings, spacing, numerals, capital letters, dot points, bold fonts. In particular:

Headings

Use a maximum of three levels: one level for the major headings, one level for the sub-headings, and one for further sub-headings. These different levels are indicated by different font sizes and styles.

Numbering

A decimal numbering system is commonly used, with single numerals (I, 2, 3,...) for the main headings, one decimal (1.1, 1.2, 1.3,...) for the second level of headings and two decimals (1.1.1, 1.1.2,...) for any third level headings.

Report outline – an example

An example of a report outline, given below, shows the three different sections (Preliminary, Main and Supplementary), and how the stages in the main section have been developed into three levels of numbered headings. Note that only the main section is numbered.

Table 2: Outline of a typical report showing sections, headings and numbering

Section	Heading and numbering
Preliminary Section	<i>Report on the proposal to establish a national music centre in East Greenwood</i>
	Table of Contents
	Executive Summary
	1.0 Introduction

Main Section: Stage 1	1.1 Background to the initiative 1.1.1 Summary of 2001 survey
	1.2 Summary of the State Arts Council's proposal
	1.3 Aims and objectives of the proposal
Main Section: Stage 2	2.0 Key Findings and Analysis
	2.1 National need for a Music Training and Resource Centre 2.1.1 Musicians 2.1.2 Current facilities 2.1.3 Current venues 2.1.4 Community response
	2.2 Analysis of findings
	3.0 Conclusion
	3.1 Feasibility 3.2 Funding 3.3 Locale
Main Section: Stage 3	4.0 Recommendations
	4.1 Establishment of links at: 4.1.1 local level 4.1.2 national level 4.1.3 international level
	Reference List
	Appendices
	Appendix I Appendix II

Useful resources

Further information about report writing can be found in the following:

Eunson, B 1994, *Writing and presenting reports*, The Communication Skills Series, John Wiley & Sons, Milton, Queensland.

Guidelines for essay and report writing, 1995, Elton Mayo School of Management, UniSA, Adelaide.

Winckel, A & Hart, B 1995, *Report writing style guide for engineering students*, 4th edn, University of South Australia, Adelaide.

Wake, B 1995, *Report writing: financial accounting B*, Literary Project, ACUE, Adelaide.

Windschuttle, K & Elliott, E 1999, *Writing, researching, communicating*, 3rd edn, Irwin McGraw-Hill, Sydney.

Learning guides	This is one of a series of guides on learning at the University of South Australia prepared by staff from Learning Connection. Other guides can be accessed at http://www.unisanet.unisa.edu.au/learningconnection/students/lmsvcs/default.asp
For further information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk to your course coordinator or assigned tutor • Visit Learning Connection on your campus or online http://www.unisanet.unisa.edu.au/learningconnection/students/default.asp