

HOW TO... Develop your Report Writing Skills

The following guidelines aim to provide a brief introduction to writing your report.

Ask your tutor for more detailed guidance.

A report should contain a front page, contents page, terms of reference, introduction, evidence (main arguments and information, which forms the main body of your report), and conclusion. In short you tell the reader what you are going to say, say it, and then remind the reader what you've said.

You then insert any appendices (a glossary, information which is too detailed for the report such as statistics or diagrams), a reference list (also called a citation list), and a bibliography at the end (see the [Student Guide to Citations, Referencing and Bibliographies](#) for further information on citation/reference lists).

Structure

Your report may not contain all of these sections; but most will be included in reports for your course:

Title page	Front cover with your name, course/class, lecturer's name, and unit title/title of the report.
Contents page	Listing of each section and the page where it appears. Leave this to the end when you will know the layout of your report.
Terms of Reference	Outlines the reason for the report; paraphrase the question you have been set.
Introduction	Sets out the scope of the report, ways in which the report will develop and an indication of the conclusion i.e. a preview of the content of your report in one paragraph to entice your reader into reading more.
Key issues	Forms the main part of the report and contains the findings, observations, arguments and facts. (Also called the evidence). Make your points one at a time and quote supporting evidence where appropriate. Use a separate paragraph for each topic/point. Use section headings if desired.
Conclusions	Drawn from the evidence of the key issues – presents your opinion – remember to refer back to the original question or your terms of reference.
Recommendations	Suggestions made based on the conclusions – not always relevant depending on the report.

Appendices	Usually information too detailed for the body of the report e.g. charts or graphs with statistical information; tables of data; descriptions of experimental procedures; anything which would interrupt the flow of the report. e.g. Appendix 1 shows the sample data from the survey and clearly shows....
Reference/Citation list	A list of all quotes, and citations of other authors' works – ideas, theories and information referenced to support your report.
Bibliography	A list of all resources consulted during your research – this list will always be longer than the citation list.

Well Written reports

What do we mean when we say something is well written? We can expect a well written report to:

- ❖ Be concise;
- ❖ Be easy to understand;
- ❖ Be written in sentences;
- ❖ Be written in paragraphs;
- ❖ Use correct grammar;
- ❖ Use accurate spelling;
- ❖ Use correct punctuation;
- ❖ Use appropriate vocabulary;
- ❖ Be in a formal style;
- ❖ Be in a formal tone.

Formal style

Reports are written using **formal language**. How can you create a formal tone and style in a report? There are a variety of ways of achieving the formal tone needed in your report:

- ❖ Choose **vocabulary** which reflects knowledge and understanding, but is not pompous nor pretentious;
- ❖ **Avoid slang** and other phrases more suited to conversations e.g. use 'do not' instead of 'don't';
- ❖ Use a business like style when expressing yourself; use direct words;
- ❖ Present information **concisely and clearly** - leave out unnecessary information;
- ❖ **Plan** your report so that it flows in a logical manner;
- ❖ Use the **active voice** rather than the passive voice where possible. The active voice uses fewer words and is more direct in presenting information

e.g. Active voice – Linda sent the letter yesterday. Passive voice – The letter was sent by Linda yesterday;

- ❖ Avoid making a report too **personal** e.g. ‘I think...’, ‘I feel’ – until you are writing your conclusion.

Key points

- ❖ Remember to write in clear **sentences** and use **paragraphs**;
- ❖ **Link points** to each other in sequence. Use link terms such as: ‘Following on from this...’, ‘The same has been noted for ...’, ‘If we accept this argument, then we may also state that’ See the Writing Skills how to guide for more linking phrases;
- ❖ Don't forget to check your **spelling, grammar** and **punctuation**;
- ❖ Use **plain English** where possible. When technical terms must be used, e.g. medical conditions, you should include a glossary. A **glossary** is a list of definitions for difficult, unusual or technical terms, and should be inserted at the end of the report before the bibliography. Using a formal style does not mean using technical terms alone to impress your reader;
- ❖ If quoting directly from text always enclose the **quotation** in inverted commas or use italics to distinguish the quote from your own words, e.g. “All the world's a stage.....” Be selective when using quotations and do not let them dominate your work. A quotation should not be more than a couple of lines long. If you present someone else's work as your own you are guilty of **plagiarism** and your report may be judged invalid. See the [Student Guide to Citations, Referencing and Bibliographies](#) for further information on quotations and plagiarism;
- ❖ **Use diagrams** only where they are relevant and support your argument. Number your diagrams and refer to them in your text e.g. Diagram 1.3 shows the decline in fertility in Scotland between 1995-2000. Do not include too many diagrams. Diagrams should support the text, not vice-versa. These can be put in your appendices or in the main text;
- ❖ If you are in doubt about a sentence, read it **aloud** – if it sounds wrong, change it;
- ❖ If you use **abbreviations or acronyms**, remember to use it in the **full form** the first time you use it, followed by the abbreviation or acronym in brackets. You can then use the abbreviation or acronym thereafter in your report e.g. British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), then use BBC in the following sections of your report;
- ❖ Try not to use politically incorrect terms e.g. policeman (use police officer), or spokesman (use spokesperson). Also avoid using he or his if the context is not gender specific, which reflects a gender bias – try using they and theirs.

- ❖ Get **someone else** to read your report and comment on it;
- ❖ Always **leave time** between writing and editing your first draft – look at it with fresh eyes. The same is true before finalising your report – leave some time before doing the final edit to ensure you can spot any errors, or where the report needs further work.

Keeping records

Keeping a proper record of everything you have read in researching for your report is vital in producing an accurate **bibliography** and when making **reference to works** in your report.

Here are a few ideas to help with your record keeping:

- ❖ Make a **note** of everything you read, even if you did not refer to it or make a direct quote from it;
- ❖ When recording sources, always note all the **details** for your bibliography. That way all the details are at your fingertips. If using the internet or online resources, then have an open word document ready to insert URLs and further bibliographic detail as you go along, which will help you keep track of which resources you found;
- ❖ Stick to the **style** recommended in the **bibliography information sheet** available in the Library, or by your tutor. The main details are: author, full title, publication date, edition, place of publication, and publisher;
- ❖ Make an accurate note of all **quotations** at the time you read them. Be quite clear what is a direct quotation and what is paraphrased;
- ❖ **Photocopy** extracts (one chapter or 5% of a book) if you want to, but add details about the source on the copy. Your tutor will know if you have used a paragraph from a book or web site without acknowledging the source, as your style will be different and easily spotted.

References/Citations

All references to sources you have used should be **acknowledged**. References to other works are very important to your report because they add weight to what has been written, show wider reading, and avoid plagiarism. Remember, however, that your tutor is entitled to follow through references; an inaccurate entry may devalue the overall report.

There are many ways of presenting references – **ask your tutor for advice**. There are 2 main referencing systems – **Harvard** and **Vancouver** (sometimes referred to as numeric).

For more in depth information on Harvard referencing, bibliographies and citation lists, see the ILS Guide – available on Moodle (ILS page), on the [College Intranet](#), or to pick up in the Learning Centres.

November 2017 LT