

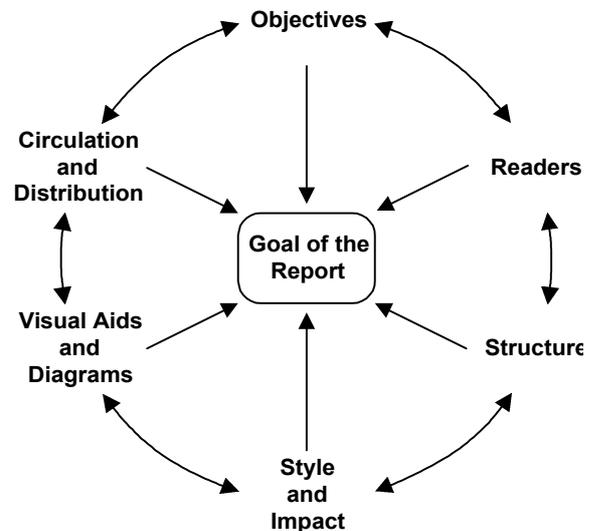
Report writing - An easy guide

(All the information that's fit to print or that fits the print?)



1. Before you start

- Every report needs to add value to the company and you - otherwise it is not worth the effort of writing!
- A report is a working document that achieves specified objectives.
- The report model shows the important factors in writing any report and these must be considered before you put pen to paper.
- If you forget any of the factors in the model you will end up taking too long to produce a report that will be inadequate and ineffective in any case.



2. The first steps - planning

- A first mistake is to assume that you know what the person who asked for the report wants. Often they do not know what they want themselves. They will never hesitate to tell you that what you have written is not what they want!
- Before starting insist on a thorough briefing from the person who requested the report and identify:
 - (a) the purpose of the report
 - (b) the need for the report
 - (c) who is going to read the report
 - (d) the scope of the report
- If they cannot, or will not, provide a briefing then do a Mind Map (see Easy Guide 6) for the topic and produce an outline of what you intend to cover. Get this approved before you write anything!
- Make a Mind Map for the report (see Easy Guide 6).
- Use the Mind Map to identify the information you need, make notes and collect the information. Select only the facts which are relevant to the objectives and the reader. Check the facts.
- Use the Mind Map to start to plan the topics AND the links between the topics.
- Be absolutely clear in your plan what you are going to say and how you will say it.
- Remember: Logical, truthful, helpful and to the point.

Get the first steps right and the rest is easy!

3. Objectives

- Decide what you want the report to achieve. Write to achieve that and only that.
- Identify your readers, their motivations, needs and concerns.
- Identify what your readers need to do to help you to achieve your objectives.
- Write your objectives and reader profile on a "Post-It" and put it where you will see it as you write. "The Economy - Stupid" was written in huge letters in Bill Clinton's campaign offices!

Knowing what you want is halfway to getting it!

4. Readers

Focus on:

- The reader's needs and concerns.
- The reader's level of knowledge and technical expertise.
- The reader's openness to new ideas.

Check:

- Will the readers easily understand what you have written? Have you used any technical or scientific words unknown to the readers?

Define your audience and write for them, not for yourself!

5. Structure

Focus on:

- The beginnings and endings of reports - these are what busy people notice most!
- Putting action points near the beginning or at the end.
- Signposting by using meaningful headings. The reader should know exactly what will happen next. Important points should stand out clearly.
- Use an "Executive Summary" written in simple language.
- Information will not be read in the order you write it. Place essential information either at the top or the bottom of the page with the less important information in the middle paragraphs.

Check:

- Have you clearly stated your conclusions and recommendations?

Structure the report for the audience!

6. Style and impact

Focus on:

- Using only straightforward, uncluttered English. Use short sentences, short words, and simple sentence construction to give accuracy, brevity and clarity
- Every word must serve a useful purpose and must be spelt correctly. Read the final copy and get someone else to read the draft - never trust a spell-checker.
- Using active verbs and concrete nouns to give a positive "feel" to the report?
- Avoid using vague phrases and jargon, slant and bias and "business English".

Check:

- Compliance with the company standard?
- Does the report look good and can it be reproduced using the available equipment?

Style can make the difference!

7. Visual aids and diagrams

Focus on:

- Using enough visual aids to improve understanding.
- Getting visual aids in the right place, clearly labelled and cross-referenced.

Check:

- Are scales, units, dimensions and magnification consistent and shown on every visual aid?
- Will the visual aids still be clear when reproduced?

A picture is worth a thousand words!

8. Circulation and distribution

- Is everybody who "needs to know" on the circulation list?
- Is the circulation too wide?
- Have you arranged for spare copies?

Make sure that all the right people get the "fruits of your labours".

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1. Readability

READER'S LEVEL

- Too specialised in approach
- Assumes too great a knowledge of the subject
- So underestimates the reader that it belabors the obvious

SENTENCE CONSTRUCTION

- Unnecessarily long in difficult material
- Subject-verb-object word order too rarely used
- Choppy overly simple style (in simple material)

PARAGRAPH CONSTRUCTION

- Lack of topic sentences
- Too many ideas in single paragraph
- Too long

FAMILIARITY OF WORDS

- Inappropriate jargon
- Pretentious language
- Unnecessarily abstract

READER DIRECTION

- Lack of framing (i.e., failure to tell the reader about purpose and direction of forthcoming discussion)
- Inadequate transitions between paragraphs
- Absence of sub-conclusions to summarise readers progress at end of divisions in the discussion

FOCUS

- Unclear as to subject of communication
- Unclear as to purpose of message

2. Correctness

MECHANICS

- Shaky grammar
- Faulty punctuation

FORMAT

- Careless appearance of documents
- Failure to use accepted company form

COHERENCE

- Sentences seem awkward owing to illogical and ungrammatical yoking of unrelated ideas
- Failure to develop a logical progression of ideas through coherent, logically juxtaposed paragraphs

3. Appropriateness

A. Upward communications

TACT

- Failure to recognise differences in position between writer and receiver
- Impolitic tone - too brusque, argumentative, or insulting

SUPPORTING DETAIL

- Inadequate support for statements
- Too much undigested detail for busy superior

OPINION

- Adequate research but too great an intrusion of opinions
Inadequate preparation or use of data known to be available
- Too few facts (and too little research) to entitle drawing of conclusions
- Presence of unasked for but clearly implied recommendations

ATTITUDE

- Too obvious a desire to please superior
- Too defensive in face of authority
- Too fearful of superior to be able do best work

B. Downward communications

DIPLOMACY

- Overbearing attitude toward subordinates
- Insulting and/or personal references
- Unmindfulness that messages are representative of management group or even of company

CLARIFICATION OF DESIRES

- Confused, vague instructions
- Superior is not sure of what is
- Withholding of information necessary to job at hand

MOTIVATIONAL ASPECTS

- Orders of superior seem arbitrary
- Superior's communications are manipulative and seemingly Insincere

4. Thought

PREPARATION

- Inadequate thought given to purpose of communication prior to its final completion
- Inadequate preparation or use of data known to be available

COMPETENCE

- Subject beyond Intellectual capabilities of writer
- Subject beyond experience of writer

FIDELITY TO ASSIGNMENT

- Failure to stick to job assigned
- Too much made of routine assignment
- Too little made of assignment

ANALYSIS

- Superficial examination of data leading to unconscious overlooking of important pieces of evidence
- Failure to draw obvious conclusions from data presented
- Presentation of conclusions unjustified by evidence
- Failure to qualify tenuous assertions
- Failure to identify and justify assumptions used
- Bias, conscious or unconscious, which leads to distorted interpretation of data

PERSUASIVENESS

- Seems more convincing than facts warrant
- Seems less convincing than facts warrant
- Too obvious an attempt to sell ideas
- Lacks action-orientation and managerial viewpoint
- To blunt an approach where subtlety and finesse called for