1.02 How to write a report

What is a report?

A report is a systematic, well organised document which defines and analyses a subject or problem, and which may include:

- The record of a sequence of events
- Interpretation of the significance of these events or facts
- Evaluation of the facts or results of research presented
- Discussion of the outcomes of a decision or course of action
- Conclusions
- Recommendations

Reports must always be:

- Accurate
- Concise
- Clear
- Well structured

Various courses require you to write reports (as opposed to essays), notably business and scientific or technical subjects.

Please check your guidelines carefully and check with your course tutors as to the report format and content expected. In addition, there is at times some blurring between what "essays", "reports" and "assignments" are, so again check within your department. Much of the advice given in the Essay Writing Guide, also applies to reports in regards to academic language, writing, structure and referencing.

Initial preparation

Always analyse your brief carefully, making sure that you fully understand the topic, question or case, that you know what the purpose of the report is, and who it is being written for. The clearer these things are in your mind, the easier the report will be to write and the more effective it will be.

When you are researching, planning and eventually writing, continually ask yourself what the main **purpose** of the report is, what your objective is in writing it: is it to inform; to argue; to persuade; to evaluate? What does your reader want to see in the report and what will they do with it?

Planning and research

You first need to decide your basic framework. With your main topic or question as a central focus, jot down your initial thoughts and start to group these together. You may find the Mind Mapping technique useful: see Useful Links. Start to divide key ideas from subsidiary information, and continually ask yourself if everything is relevant; if it isn't, then delete it.

From your prior knowledge (from reading and lectures), you should be able to put together a fairly basic structure.

You will now be able to plan your research. Ask yourself what you need to find out, maybe in the form of questions that need to be answered, then approach your reading from this starting point. If you have specific information to look for, it will make your reading easier and less time consuming.

Try not to gather too much information. Again, keeping your topic or question in mind, reject anything which is not 100% relevant. When you're making notes, always try to summarise the main points as concisely as possible. Remember to make a comprehensive record of any sources consulted in order to be able to correctly reference these.

Make a record of the research methods you used.

Report structure

Unlike essays, reports are written in sections with headings and sub-headings, which are usually numbered. Below are the possible components of a report, in the order in which they would appear. Check within your department which of these you should include.

Title page (always included)

This should normally include the title, your name and the name of the tutor to whom it is being submitted, date of submission, your course/department, and if applicable, the name of the person and/or organisation who has commissioned the report. Avoid "fancy" fonts and effects and don't include any clipart.

Acknowledgements (usually just in long reports)

A list of people and organisations both within and outside Birmingham City University who have helped you.

Abstract (usually included in longer reports; also called Executive Summary, Summary or Synopsis)

This is a very brief outline of the entire report (rather than just an introduction to it) to give the potential reader a general idea of what it's about. A statement of:

- Overall aims and specific objectives (unless included in terms of reference)
- Method/procedure used (unless included in a separate section)
- Key findings
- Main conclusions and recommendations

Contents page (always included in reports of 4+ pages)

A clear, well-formatted list of all the sections and sub-sections of the report. Don't forget to put the page numbers! If applicable, there should be a separate list of tables, figures, illustrations and/or appendices after the main index.

Make sure that the headings in this list correspond exactly with those in your main body. It is best to do your list of contents right at the end.

Glossary (occasionally included)

Include a glossary if the report includes a lot of specialised vocabulary or acronyms which may not be familiar to the reader.

Terms of reference (sometimes included)

A definition of the task; your specific objective and purpose of writing. Even if you don't include this as a heading, it is a vital process to go through in your planning. What exactly is your report going to be about? If it is group work, who exactly is responsible for what? How long have you got? What is your task timescale? Why are you writing the report? What exactly are the assessment criteria? Who are you writing the report for? Are you actually playing a role? What does your reader want to see?

Introduction (always included)

This should show that you have fully understood the task/brief and that you are going to cover everything required. Indicate the basic structure of the report, so your reader knows what to expect. You should include just a little background/context and indicate the reasons for writing the report. You may include your terms of reference and procedure/research methods if not covered elsewhere. Your introduction will often give an indication of the conclusion to the report.

Literature review/Review of existing knowledge (included in longer reports, when applicable)

The Literature review provides an overview of your subject and puts your own research into context. It critically analyses what has been said on the topic, who the key writers are and what the main ideas or theories are. It is important to write this section before you begin your own primary research, as you should base your Methodology on the findings of your Literature Review. The Literature Review will usually use journal articles as the main sources of information. The most important feature is the critical analysis of the research that has already been carried out on the subject, so make sure that you examine the different points of view and the strengths and weaknesses of the research. In the conclusion of the Literature Review section you also need to include a summary of how your Literature Review affects your own research – how will your methodology be affected by your Review findings, for example? Remember to reference all your sources correctly.

Methodology/Materials and methods (included if applicable)

This section should be written before you begin your primary research because it is about the choices you have made in the way the research is carried out. A Methodology is usually more appropriate to scientific or engineering report writing, but will be very different depending on your subject – it could be an experimental method, a design process or a business methodology, for example. In your Methodology, you investigate the different (relevant) methods /procedures /equipment /software /processes /analysis methods/ selection procedures for participants etc… that could be used in your research and how they would be applied (please check your guidelines). You should then analyse them by looking at their advantages/disadvantages and whether they have any limitations, and doing a comparison to establish which one(s) would be most appropriate in your research. You must give justifications for your choices (even if this is just availability or affordability) and outline how you will overcome any limitations. If you make any changes to the way you carry out your research (perhaps because initial experiments/designs did not work as expected), you need to outline these changes in the Methodology and justify them.

Main body (always included)

This is the substance of your report. The structure will vary according to the nature of the material being presented, with headings and sub-headings used to clearly indicate the different sections (unlike an essay). Make sure that your headings are specific and informative ('Main Body' is not an appropriate heading). A "situation > problem > solution > evaluation" approach may be appropriate. In some reports, a Results/Findings section may be included. This section records your observations (in the past tense) and normally includes statistics, tables or graphs. A Results section must be followed by an Analysis/Discussion section, where the significance of the

results and any limitations are analysed. Charts, diagrams and tables can be used to reinforce your arguments, although sometimes it may be better to include these as an appendix (particularly if they are long or complicated). It is not sufficient to simply describe a situation. Your tutor will be looking for analysis and for a critical approach, when appropriate.

Conclusion (always included)

Your conclusion should draw out the implications of your findings, with deductions based on the facts described in your main body. Identify any shortcomings or limitations of your research, and how your findings could be applied in a wider context. Don't include any new material here.

Recommendations (sometimes included)

These should follow on logically from your conclusion and be specific, measurable and achievable. They should propose how the situation/problem could be improved by suggesting action to be taken. A "statement of cost" should be included if you are recommending changes that have financial implications. Recommendations can be numbered if you wish.

References (always included)

This is a list giving the full details of all the sources to which you have made reference within your text.

Bibliography (sometimes included)

This is a separate list of sources which you have used during your research but have not actually made reference to in your writing. Check in your department which system you are expected to use.

Appendices (sometimes included)

An Appendix (plural=appendices) is detailed documentation of points you outline in your findings, for example, technical data, questionnaires, letters sent, tables, sketches, charts, leaflets, etc. It is supplementary information which you consider to be too long or complicated or not quite relevant enough to include in your main body, but which still could be of interest to your reader. Each Appendix should be referred to in your text. You should not include something as an appendix if it is not discussed in the main body. Do not include copies of articles in your Appendix.

Style

Always use clear and concise English, avoiding jargon and colloquial language (slang or casual English):

- Write in fairly short sentences.
- Make sure you develop each paragraph sufficiently (usually a minimum of 5/6 sentences).
- Most of your report should be impersonal, although it may be appropriate in your conclusion or recommendations to include more personal language.
- Be extra careful with verb tenses.

Check everything carefully

Careful checking of your report before you print off the final version can make a big difference. Check:

- General layout
- Text organisation
- Coherence
- Grammar, spelling and punctuation
- Referencing

And finally overall, does the report fulfil its purpose? Does it do what you're being asked to do and what you say you're going to do in your introduction? Are you pleased with it? If you can't confidently answer "yes" to these questions, then you may need to do some major editing and rewriting.