Writing a Report

The first point to be aware of in writing a report is that there are many different formats used. Courses such as Business Studies, Disaster Management, Medicine or Psychology all have their own requirements which are based on standard professional practice in the field. Therefore it is very important to pay attention to the assignment guidelines, particularly in the matter of whether or not to include components such as an abstract, introduction, literature review, methodology, results, discussion, recommendations, etc. Some subject areas will call for a more specific approach, where the titles you should use for certain sections are indicated in the assessment guidelines. Check with your tutor or supervisor if you have any doubts about which sections to include.

Format and contents page

A report is structured by a hierarchy of headings and sub-headings. Decide early on what your formatting will be, and use the same pattern of font size and style for both the contents page and the numbered titles within the body of the document. For example:

1. First main idea
   1.1. First subdivision of main idea
   1.2. Second subdivision of main idea
      1.2.1. First example
      1.2.2. Second example
         1.2.2.1. First detail
         1.2.2.2. Second detail
      1.3. Third subdivision of main idea

2. Second main idea
   etc.

(adapted from Marsen 2003: 137)
Structuring a report is a less complex task than deciding how to structure an essay, because the sections and sometimes even the paragraphs are all named and numbered. Bullet points may be used in moderation if a lengthy series of related points needs to be listed. However, within the sections and sub-sections, the aim should be to create paragraphs of prose, showing thematic unity.

A report is, like an essay, a type of argument, which means that you should state a position or argue a case with supporting evidence. The aim is to be as concise and clear as possible. The report’s purpose is for someone to consult it in order to find out specific pieces of information. Does it tell the reader exactly what he or she needs to know?

**Common components of a report**

**Abstract**

This is a paragraph-long summary of the paper which often appears on the title page. The abstract can be used to represent the full report in databases and journal and conference submissions, so it needs to be brief and informative. Try to use the shortest word count possible, ideally less than 100 words. The abstract includes **no** detailed description, and states only the research area, what experiment or procedure was conducted, what was found out, and the contribution to the field. Avoid adjectives, adverbs, terms of quantity and description, first person, and even phrases such as ‘this report shows…’.

**Literature review**

The literature review is a major component of any academic report (although some disciplines may include it in the introduction section). The literature review can be an extended essay in its own right - some can be 10,000 words long! The review is structured by **idea-based paragraphs** and all arguments are backed up by **evidence**. The review needs to assess the **quality and usefulness** of the available literature on the subject under discussion, and to highlight **gaps or weaknesses** to justify further research in a specific area.
The best way of writing a literature review is to think about constructing **two separate documents**. The first, built up as you research, summarises the existing research and establishes your reactions to it. For each source, you need to ascertain:

- What has been discussed/carried out/discovered?
- What methodology was employed?

Considerations include:

- Are the data collection procedures valid (is there a wide and varied sample, has the possibility of bias been minimised, have there been appropriate ethical considerations, etc.)?
- Is there a reflective discussion of results, acknowledging factors such as problems of using either quantitative or qualitative data?
- What are the limitations of the piece of research? Are they clearly defined?
- How does this research tie in with other research? Is it a seminal (ground-breaking) piece of work? How does it build upon (or counter) previous research?
- How convincing/useful is the piece of research?

This stockpile of research sources can evolve like your list of references, perhaps on a set of filing cards or in a computer file or database. It represents your increasing knowledge of the subject.

At the point of writing your second document, the structured essay draft itself, the information can be extrapolated to back up your arguments through paraphrasing, summarising and discussing the articles and other sources — **always with references cited in the Harvard Referencing Style** (see the Coventry University Guide to Referencing in Harvard Style).

**Results**

The results section presents your **data** only. It may be useful, where numeric or statistical information has been gathered, to tabulate your data (put it into a table). Tables can be accompanied by figures (in academic work the term ‘figure’ means all pictorial information used in the paper, including diagrams, illustrations, graphs and pie charts).
Remember to title and label all tables and figures numerically (e.g. ‘Figure 1. Carbon molecules’). Explain immediately after the table or figure what it tells the reader, **factually** rather than analytically. Are there patterns or correlations? Are there any unusually high or low data or findings that contradict the majority? Do the percentiles match what is expected? **State such explanations after a table.** Finally, include a full list of figures and tables (with page numbers) on your contents page.

**Discussion**

The discussion section is where you **analyse** the findings. It needs to draw again on further reading, evidenced by references to previous scholarship, to sum up and contextualise what your research tells the reader. Reasons for unusual or false results, consideration of faults in data collection methods, and limitations of the study may also be addressed (be honest: remember no report can give the full story!). The format inside the discussion section will often be that of an essay, with in-text citations. Be sure to address the question: what do the findings **mean**?

**Reference**