

Writing reports

Why are students asked to write reports?

University students write reports for a variety of purposes. Some reasons include to:

- report on a research study or project that you have undertaken. This is referred to as a *research report*
- report on a research study or project you plan to undertake. This is called a *research proposal* and has much the same structure as a *research report* except that you are reporting on what you are going to do rather than on what you have done
- report on what you have found out by reading about a topic. This type of report is called a *research by reading* report
- report on and evaluate something, for example a workplace practice or behaviour. This type of report is called an *evaluative* report.

Suggested structures for three types of reports

If you don't have any specific guidelines from your lecturer, it is the purpose of the report that generally dictates the particular structure you use to present your ideas. All reports have sections with headings and, usually, subheadings. Often these are numbered in larger reports. The number of sections varies according to the type of report and according to what the assessment specifically requires.

A research report (and research proposal)

The structure of this type of report typically includes the sections and headings (and subheadings) in the table below. Often the headings are also numbered. If you have sub-sections within each of the major sections you can number them as follows:

- 1.1
 - 1.1.1
 - 1.1.2
- 1.2

Letter of transmittal (generally ONLY requested in Business and Tourism units)

Abstract (Also often called an **Executive Summary** or **Summary**)

Table of Contents

1. Introduction
2. Methods, Procedure or Methodology
3. Results (Expected Results in a research proposal)
4. Discussion or interpretation of Results
5. Conclusions
6. Recommendations

List of References

Appendices (or **Appendix** if there is only one)

Sections commonly found in a research report

A research by reading report

This report structure is often used when you have to present a report based on the findings of research by reading. It may contain all or some of the following sections depending on the length of assessment and the instructions you are given.

Letter of transmittal (generally ONLY requested in Business and Tourism units)

Title

Abstract (Also often called an **Executive Summary** or **Summary** in Business and Tourism units)

Table of Contents

Introduction

Body (generally not used as a heading)

The body of this type of report is often structured with headings and subheadings relevant to the topic/s researched.

Conclusions

Recommendations (if relevant)

List of References

Appendices (may include photographs, illustrations)

Sections commonly found in a research by reading report

An evaluative report

This report structure is often used when you have to research theory and apply it to a practical or real situation. It may contain all or some of the following sections and headings (and necessary and relevant subheadings) depending on the length of the assessment and of course the instructions given in your assessment task.

Letter of transmittal (generally ONLY requested in Business and Tourism units)

Title

Abstract (Also often called an **Executive Summary** or **Summary** in Business and Tourism units)

Table of Contents

Introduction

Body (generally not used as a heading)

The body of this type of report is often structured with headings and subheadings relevant to:

- providing a factual description of the workplace/situation ('to set the scene' for the subsequent findings (analysis and/or evaluation) conclusions and recommendations)
- presenting the theory, results or findings and interpretations (evaluation/s) of these observations. There are several options for presenting the body section (see below).

Conclusions

Recommendations (if relevant)

Appendices (may include photographs, illustrations)

Sections commonly found in an evaluative report

Options for presenting the body of evaluative reports

Option 1:

You can have three separate sections (and headings and subheadings) for:

- theory
- observation
- evaluation/interpretation.

Option 2:

You can have two separate sections (and headings and subheadings) for:

- theory
- observation and evaluation/interpretation.

Option 3:

Separate sections (with headings and subheadings) for each component of the theory, each comprising of:

- observation/evaluation/interpretation and theory or vice-versa.

What the parts of a reports are for

Letter of transmittal

This is a letter that establishes contact with the receiver and so acts as a formal record of delivery of the report.

Title

This is a succinct statement of the problem, question or content being investigated.

Abstract (often referred to as an **Executive Summary**, or **Summary in Business & Tourism**)

The abstract provides the reader with a succinct overview of the whole report. It generally contains at least one sentence from each of the parts of the report and will state briefly the aim or purpose; the procedure, methodology or analytical process; and the major findings and recommendations.

It is generally written after you have finished the rest of the report to ensure that it gives the reader a succinct overview of the complete report. Even though it is written last, the Abstract is placed at the beginning of the report, before the Table of Contents.

Unlike other sections in a report, the abstract is meant to be a stand-alone section. An abstract or executive summary provides those readers who don't have the time to read the whole report in detail with an overview of the whole report.

Table of contents

This is a list of headings, tables, figures and plans that have been used in the report. It should include the page number next to each item. The Table of Contents is placed on a separate page.

Introduction

This section sets the scene for the reader and includes:

- the aims or objectives of the exercise, or the purpose of the report, or report proposal
- the scope of the report – what the report covers, how the information or report is limited/constrained, and it may include any relevant background information if it is a short report (e.g. definitions, review of similar research). If it is a more comprehensive research report (i.e. longer report) the review of the literature is often given in a separate section under its own heading
- an outline of how the sections/information will be presented.

Methods, methodology or procedure

This section describes, factually, how the study was carried out. It includes an outline of how the information was gathered (e.g. interviews, questionnaires for the report or data).

Results

This section presents the results obtained from interpreting the data you have gathered. Present the information clearly, concisely and record only facts. No personal opinions are included. Include any relevant graphs, tables or plans to summarise the findings.

Discussion or interpretation of results

This section discusses the results. The results are interpreted and compared to those of relevant studies/theories referred to earlier in the report.

Conclusions

This section summarises the main points or findings of the investigation and discusses what the findings actually mean. Ensure that the conclusion is consistent with the information presented in the body section. Don't include any new information in the conclusion.

Recommendations (if requested)

As a result of the investigations and your understanding of the relevant theory, what recommendations can you make (e.g. for further study of the problem or issue, to improve the workplace practice, behaviours)?

List of references

List all the references that have been cited in the report (e.g. readings, research, captions, tables, graphs, plans, diagrams or appendices).

Appendices (or Appendix if there is only one)

An appendix is used when information would be useful to give background information to the reader, but would interrupt the flow if it was included in your report e.g. transcripts of interviews, club rules, or plans that are not immediately relevant. Number each appendix and check that your numbering corresponds with the numbers given within your report. Ensure that all information is appropriately referenced.

Common problems with reports

- Having an abstract or executive summary that reads like a conclusion rather than a summary of the whole report
- Discussing the results in the results section when the results section should ONLY contain the results and no discussion of these results
- Numbering that is inconsistent when numbering headings and subheadings
- Writing descriptively when analysis and/or evaluation is required
- Not enough use of theory (and thus in-text references) to explain and/or substantiate your interpretations
- Relying too much on headings to do the work for the reader. Make sure that your first sentence after the heading introduces the section/paragraph
- Not changing the writing style (particularly the tense, though that is not discussed here) to suit the particular sections.

Check the *SCU Learning Zone* for more related Quick Guides.