How To Write A Report

Learning Enhancement Team

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Variety is the Spice of Life!

Different Schools…   ….Different Rules

- – Can you use 'I' in an academic text?
- – Should an essay have section headings?
- – How long is a report?
- – Do you use primary or secondary research?
- – Footnotes, endnotes or no notes?
- – Harvard style referencing or MLA? What about APA?

Which school are you in? What is acceptable and what is unacceptable in your field?

Always check in your module handbooks or with your tutor if you are concerned about appropriacy
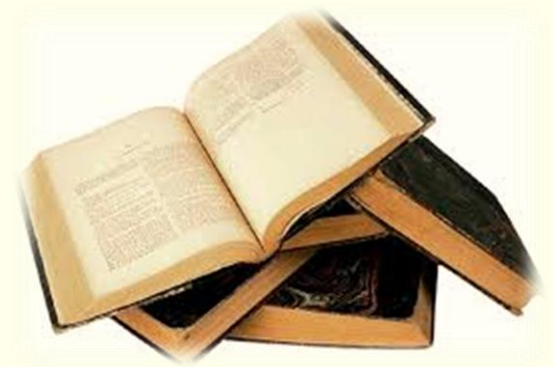
How To Write A Report Aims

— To learn what a Report is

— To discuss the process(es) of writing a Report

— To look the structure of a Report
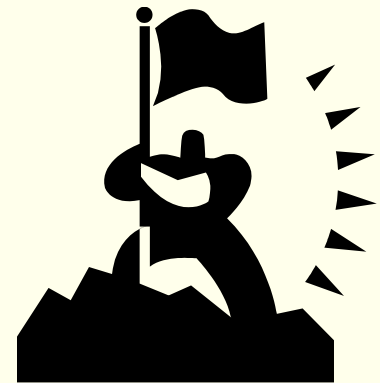
What Is A Report?

A report has four main aims. Using the prompts below, what do you think these aims could be?

— Inform (1)

— Inform (2)

— Recommend

— Trust

What Is A Report?

— Inform (1)

- Tell your reader, clearly and accurately, about something that has happened

— Inform (2)

- Tell your reader, clearly and accurately, about a problem/situation that needs to be resolved

— Recommend

- Give useful and clear recommendations regarding how to resolve the issues you have raised

— Trust

- Provide your reader with rigorous data that can be trusted and acted upon.

Task

Reports follow a common structure. These elements are currently in the wrong order. With a partner, put them in the correct order:

— Analysis

— References

— Executive Summary

— Results

— Title

— (Limitations)

— Introduction

— Contents

— Conclusion

— Methodology

— Recommendations

— Appendices

Task

— Title page

— Contents

— Executive summary

— Introduction

— Methodology

— Results

— Analysis

— Conclusions

— Recommendations

— (Limitations)

— (Reflection)

— References

— Appendices

Continuity

One of the most common pitfalls students face when writing a Report is consistency *across* the Report.

Most people decide to write their report in sections. While this has its advantages in terms of time management and self-organisation, it can have a <u>major</u> drawback.

What do you think the problem (potentially) is?
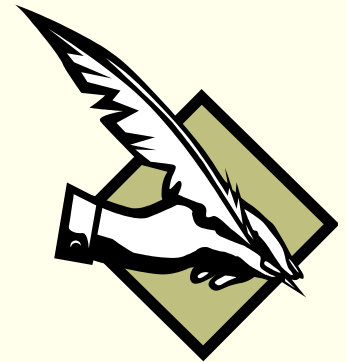
Continuity

Despite being structured (and possibly written) in distinct sections, a report should:

— *look* like a single coherent document
  - consistency of visual style [e.g. font, line-spacing, underlining of headings]
  - justify margins

— *read* like a single coherent document
  - Sections should be linked ("bridging")
  - information needs to be unified
  - attitude / approach to information needs to be unified
  - writing style needs to be consistent

The Writing Process
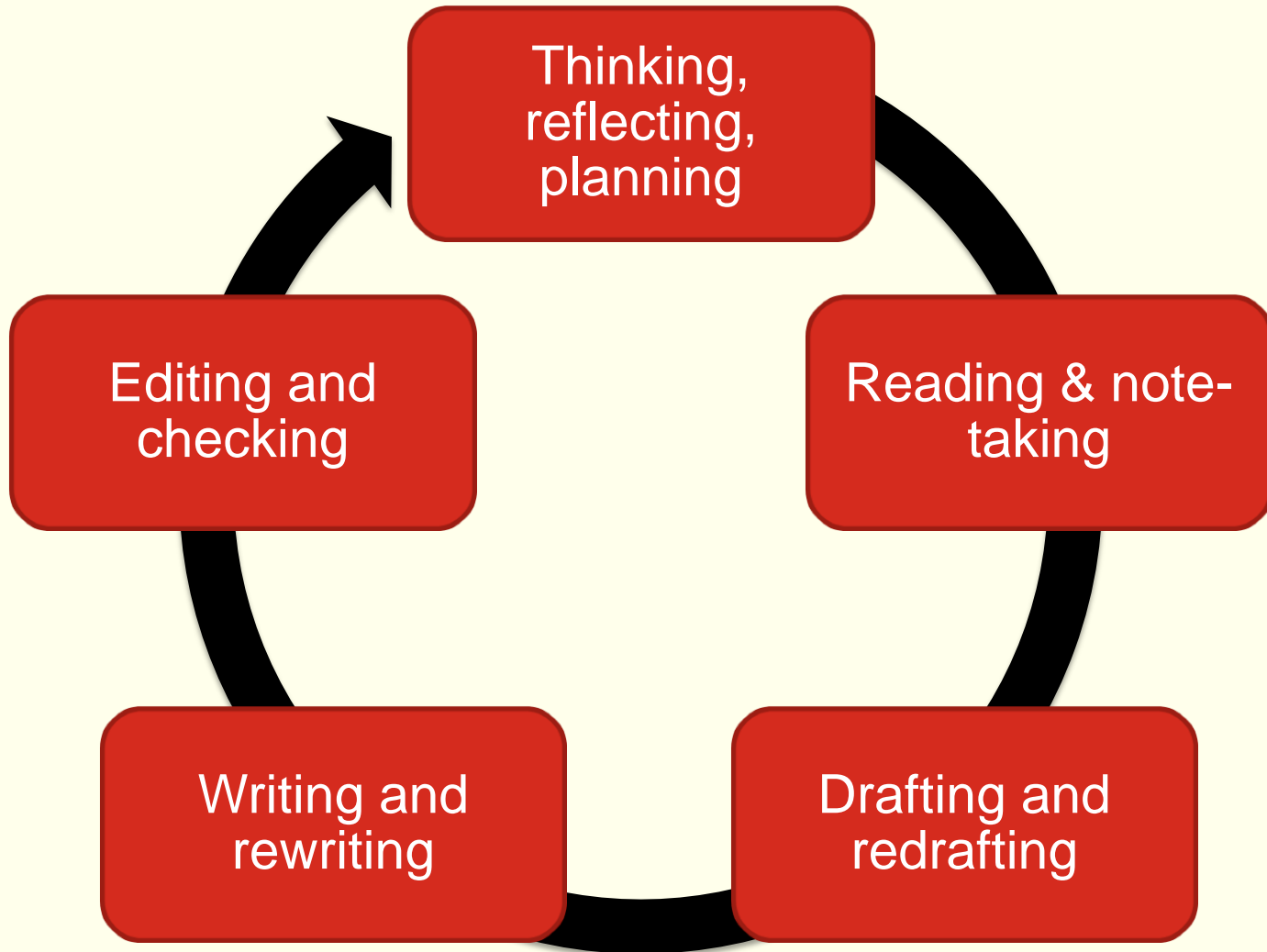
Audience

Who is going to read your report?

Try not to think in terms of your lecturer as your reader. Instead, imagine your report is going to be read by the CEO of a large, multi-national company. Ask yourself these questions:

— How much time does this person have?

— Will they understand 'wordy', academic styles?

— If they read this report, would they pay you for your advice?

Lab Reports are a different genre. The _AWL Open Workshop_ **How To Write Lab Reports** covers them in detail.

Title And Contents

Title Page

1. This should show
   i. The title
   ii. Your name
   iii. Your personal identifier (NB: this should also be at the top of every sheet.)
   iv. An explanation of what the report is on and who it is for, e.g. 'An External Environment Analysis Report for [tutor's name/name of   manager]
   v. The date

Contents List

2. This should show
   i. The full list of sections within the report (including any appendices, reference or bibliographic lists; etc.)
   ii. The page number on which each section begins

Don't forget the *AWL Open Workshop* **How To Read Journal Articles** can help you get to the crux of critical reading!

Executive Summary

What is an executive summary?

— A one-page summary which outlines, in no more than three short paragraphs (and preferably just one), what the Report says.

When should you *write* it? Why?

— You should write this last, once you have a clear idea of the main findings/recommendations of your Report.

What tense (past, present, future) should it be written in?

— It should be in the third person and present tense: ˈThe report considers the arguments in favour of Quality Circles and makes recommendations about their adoption."

Contents Page

Introduction

The introduction is where your orientate your reader to the topic, focus and importance of your report.

— This should give a succinct explanation of the aims/context of the report, and should include brief details of any information necessary for the reader to understand it, e.g. company size; structure; main activities; your role/position; etc.

— Introduction should include brief breakdown of report structure

Main-body

In the main-body of the Report you present your account of the issue(s) being reviewed.

— It should be based on <u>analysis</u>, not intuition
  - Avoid using language like 'I feel'

— You must support <u>your ideas</u> with <u>evidence</u> and <u>logical argument</u>
  - You must *substantiate* each assertion you make with evidence, e.g. extracts from the company annual report, a staff survey, recent appraisal interviews, etc.
  - You must *support* opinions with specific examples/ evidence (e.g. from a consultant's report), or by building a logical argument based on previously cited examples/evidence
  - You should make a *clear distinction* between objective facts and personal opinions

Main-body

In the main-body of the Report you present your account of the issue(s) being reviewed.

— Format

- Ideally this section is divided into sub-sets, using headings (see briefing sheet)
- Any images / diagrams should be labelled (fig.1, table 2…)
- You should direct your reader to the correct image / diagram. For example:
  - *As can be see in table 4…*
  - *Figure 3 shows…*
  - *..a substantial increase is seen (table 6).*
- Consider using mini-introductions and conclusions

Conclusion

The conclusion is where you sum up the general conclusion(s) you have reached. For example, you might conclude that "Low staff morale is a result of an autocratic management style"".

— Don't confuse the Conclusion with the Results section:

• The conclusion is where you draw together the threads of the preceding discussion to make some overall comments.

— It is sometimes useful to present your conclusion(s) in bullet points.

Recommendations

This is where you list the actions that your conclusions lead you to believe are necessary. For example: "The team leader should attend a course in modern management techniques".

— The recommendations <u>must</u> be based on the Discussion and Conclusion.

— Wherever possible you should include a clear indication of:
  - the priorities
  - other costs/resource implications

References

This is a lost of <u>all</u> the sources you have used in your report. You need to include information on:

— The title

— The writer/s or editor/s

— The publisher

— The date of publication

The LDU *AWL Open Workshops* **Understanding Plagiarism And Referencing** and/or **Integrating Sources In Your Writing** may also be useful.

Appendices

The Appendices is where you can place additional information. Look at these statements, are they true or false?

– The Appendix is part of your word count.

    False

– The Appendices need to be referenced in your text.

• True. You should refer to the material in your Appendices in the same way you would to tables and figures: (see Appendix 1)..

– You can include information in your Appendices that is <u>not</u> referenced in your text.

• False. Its main purpose is to allow you to include important information which, if it were included in the main body of the report, would interrupt the flow of the argument you are developing there.

– Appendices are not counted towards your final grade.

• It depends… Some assignments specifically require the Appendices to contain certain material, which will be considered holistically as part of your grade. Check your brief.

Limitations

You may be required – or you may chose to – include a Limitations section in your report. This can have advantages:

— Allows for more critical assessment
— Shows professional awareness
— Acknowledges difficulties

But it can also have disadvantages:

— Adds to the word count
— Very easy to 'complain' rather than assess

Task

Compare these two Limitations sections. Which one is better? Why?

1. Respondent fatigue can be classified as an "unconscious misinterpretation" (Smith, 1998) on the part of the respondent, and was an affecting issue during data collection. This is because some respondent's responses were collected after they had undergone their exercise regimes. They were understandably fatigued and some measure of unintended bias may therefore be present in their answers.

2. There were some issues encountered when gather data outside Fitness First, mostly as a result of the respondents being tired. This is one of the reasons why the Results section is limited. If the respondents had been better able to answer the research questions, there would have been more data to work with.

Reflection

Some tutors may require you to include a Reflection/Reflexive Section in your report. This is an opportunity for you to:

— Step back from the Report, and focus on your own process

— To critically evaluate your input, learning and assumptions

— To analyse how *you* have affected the outcomes of your report

— To discuss future actions and learning needs

The *AWL Open Workshop* **Reflective Writing** could help you, if you feel unsure how to write reflectively.

Criteria For Success

- Stay on task

- Address the question set

- [Choose a real organisation?]

- Discuss its structure

- Relating the structure to the organisation's goals

- Discuss its culture

- Relate that to the organisation's goals & structure

- Discuss any other business functions

- Can the organisation improve in any of these areas?

- All recommendations must be based on the analysis you have done.

- The report must be self-contained, grounded and clear. The reader needs no prior knowledge to understand all aspects.

Criteria For Success

— Avoid "ibid"

— Avoid footnotes

— 1.5 or double-spaced lines

— Justified pages

— Links between sections [bridging]

— Simple aesthetics

Executive Summary Example

The purpose of this project is to discover what quantitative factors affect decision making as far as long term and short term customers of Fitness First are concerned. The research in this project is based on a quantitative and qualitative approach, using non probability sampling and focus groups amongst other research methods. The project found that Fitness Firsts main problems coincides with its change of ownership, and that it wouldn't take a particularly great effort to get it back on track. In some ways, the project is limited in terms of its in inability to gain an audience with senior managers at Fitness First, forcing speculation as to why certain decisions were taken. The ideas presented in this project while simple, should go a long way towards solving the problems that Fitness First are currently facing, while also providing a framework in the form of questionnaires which can easily be repeated at a future date to ensure that the problem has in fact been eradicated.

Recommendations Example

The current context and likely changes to contextual factors in the future raise certain areas that could be improved. <u>The first and perhaps most important point</u> is the fact that the Trust has relied on a traditional customer base as its audience. <u>While this decision has proved aided them thus far,</u> <u>it is important that this stagnant way of thinking is changed</u>. As the population gets older the Trust's traditional customers will be physically unable to go to the theatre as often. When this happens it will be important that the Trust has increased its customer base to include younger members of the area or else it will face financial problems. <u>Marketing should be targeted to</u> younger audiences and this should be reflected all areas of strategic management such as employing younger members of staff as frontline staff at the Trust, and carrying out relevant market research to identify key interests for the younger population. There is a need for the Trust to pay attention to and be aware of technological advances. Opportunities may arise due to this area that the Trust is able to take advantage of. In order to be placed to do this…

Limitations Example

While every effort was undertaken to ensure that the project was carried out in as unbiased and effective a manner as possible, there were **different limiting factors** that meant that the aim of a thoroughly evaluated sample could never be reached.

It was clear that not every member of the target population (as defined for this project) could be contacted, which meant that probability sampling was not an option, therefore the only possible option was to make use of a different form of sampling methodology. The form of sampling that was chosen was non-probability sampling with particular use of snowball, judgemental and convenience sampling.

In hindsight, there were other errors that were made, that would have limited the outcomes of the project. **These errors were not limited to sampling errors, but also included** some non-sampling errors. **Examples of this were** things that were affected by the fatigue of respondents, social desirability and refusals.

Reflection Example (1)

CSR is rapidly becoming a tool that organisations use to attempt to gain competitive advantage according to Stahl and Grigsby (1997). It emerged as a useful tool as a result of organisation scanning the environments they were operating in, and appreciating that customers were beginning to be more socially aware. The ideas of scanning the environment in order to create competitive advantage and seeking to create value in as many avenues as possible are three separate ideas that can be combined practically in an organisation. It is important that the Trust do not take a narrow minded approach to their activities but instead see how various components interact and can be blended to form a strategic approach to achieving organisational goals. The fact that the theatre has traditionally only been used for theatrical and similar productions doesn't mean that allowing the snooker world championships to take place there was the wrong decision. It is important therefore that all members of the board see how a more open minded approach to strategy formulation can be beneficial to the Trust.

Reflection Example (2)

This dissertation process has provided an opportunity to increase my knowledge on both a personal and academic level. Some of the key areas where this has proved to be the case are highlighted below:

1) Undertaking a literature review on the subject of appraisals has been an excellent opportunity to better grasp the concepts involved with an appraisal. It is clear that it is enough to simply know who is being involved, questions also need answering over what is being appraised which in turn is affected by and will affect why the appraisal is occurring at all.

2) The concept of training for an appraisee was a new one to me. I would suggest now however that it may be just as important to provide appraisee training as it is to provide appraiser training. There is probably little benefit to be had from an organisational perspective if an appraiser receives useful feedback, but no guidance on how to use that feedback.

Where now?

— Need more detailed assistance? <u>Book a tutorial</u>!

— Want feedback on a specific section? <u>Drop in to *Getting Your Assignment Ready*</u>!

— Want somewhere quiet to write, and get on the spot assistance? <u>Try The Writing Space</u>!

— Got a few quick questions? *AWL Office Hours* at [The Study Hub] are for you!

— *AWL Open Workshops* can be <u>booked here</u>!

- *Suggestions:*
  - How To Read Journal Articles
  - How To Write A Lab Report
  - Reflective Writing
  - Understanding Plagiarism and Referencing
  - Integrating Sources In Your Writing

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It's QUESTION TIME!!