

How to write an Academic Business Report



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Writing an Academic Business Report

Writing a report may be divided into six broad areas:

1. identification and acquisition of relevant sources
2. preliminary research, which normally takes the form of reading and making notes and possibly visits to organisations for primary data
3. focused thinking about your report
4. writing your report plan
5. writing your first draft
6. producing the final report

You should form the habit of looking very closely at the report title at this stage to see exactly what it is asking you. Do not forget that the same report may be answered in a variety of different ways, **THERE IS NO ONE CORRECT ANSWER TO ANY GIVEN QUESTION.**

What is always required however is some kind of evidence to support the points you wish to make, whether it is evidence from a text, a journal, or in certain cases a primary source. At this point you should be beginning to think in terms of the argument you wish to make and the evidence you might use. You will not need to use all the notes you have compiled as a result of your research, but you should never regard your research as wasted even if you don't use it, as it will increase your knowledge and understanding of the subject which will be reflected in your later work. Sometimes the kind of evidence you have gathered may influence the line of argument you choose to take. At other times you will be clear from the first what line of argument you intend to take.

Planning Your Report

You have now reached the very important stage of planning your report. It may be that, as a consequence of your more focused thinking, you already have some kind of plan in mind, or you may at this stage still be slightly confused about what precise form your report will take. If this is the case, don't worry, once you put in some thinking about the structure of your report all will become clear.

NEVER TRY TO WRITE A REPORT BY SIMPLY PATCHING TOGETHER IDEAS GLEANED FROM DIFFERENT BOOKS OR SETS OF NOTES

Many students think that they know how to write essays but that writing reports is harder. In fact the reverse is true for the following reason. In order to be comprehensive, any written work must have a structure; that is what enables the reader to assimilate it. The structure is like a skeleton; it gives shape to the material within. In an essay, the structure is hidden, like an invisible internal skeleton; it serves a vital purpose in preventing the body (of text) from collapsing in a shapeless heap. However, in a report the structure is visible, like an external skeleton, in the form of headings, sub-headings,

numbering systems, and cross-references.

A report is much easier to read because the structure is visible, which is why the report is normally preferred for any business communication longer than about two pages.

The Structure of Reports

Academic reports are made up of a number of 'parts' which take the reader logically through from start to finish, providing information in neat 'chunks'. Below are listed details of a commonly used format.

TITLE PAGE

Usually begins 'Report on.....' or 'Report into.....' followed by a precise descriptive title. Avoid vague or incomplete titles.

SUMMARY

The first page of longer detailed reports (e.g. dissertations) is a list of the main points of the report. This page sometimes has the title 'Management Overview'. Its main purpose is to summarise the key points of the report for the busy manager. Such a summary would enable the manager to read only select parts of the report and merely skim read the rest.

CONTENTS PAGE

Again this usually applies to longer detailed reports. It would list the contents of the report with relevant page numbers.

1.0 Terms of Reference

These define the scope and limitations of the report, usually within one short paragraph. They should include:

- The name of the person or organisation who asked for the report
- The date of the request and the likely date of completion
- The exact subject of the report, **usually a repetition of the question set.**
- Whether recommendations have been asked for and included.

2.0 Procedure

This section explains how the report was tackled and lists the methods of investigation used to find the information. These include:

Reference to existing published sources; interviews; meetings; visits; expert opinion; scientific measurement; questionnaires; memos to specific people; direct observation

3.0 Findings

All the information and opinion discovered appear in this section. It is usually the longest part of the report and it is important to set it out in a logical way (e.g. advantages and disadvantages, or academic theory and practice found). Always state the sources of opinion and present the facts in plain, formal English. Reports are intended for busy people who need to assimilate the contents of your report rapidly, therefore the content must

be clear and readily understood.

4.0 Conclusion

A shorter section, normally one or two paragraphs, in which conclusions are drawn from the evidence set out in the 'Findings'. This is a summary stating the significant results of the research.

5.0 Recommendations

These are included only when requested in the terms of reference. They point to specific action/inaction which is clearly justified by earlier discussion within the findings.

Quoting your sources

A Warning Note on Plagiarism

Plagiarism is the cardinal academic sin and plagiarised submissions fail.

One form of 'quotation' that is absolutely unacceptable is plagiarism - the copying of others' words and ideas without acknowledgement. Even if you alter one or two words within a 'lift' of several lines, you will still be deemed guilty of plagiarism. This applies to everything, from books in the library, internet sources and tutors' handouts to your friends' work. Plagiarism is always severely punished and may result in the award of zero marks for any coursework in which it is found. **You are advised to consult the Students' Guide for details of the College policy on plagiarism.**

Whenever you use information from any source you must quote (or cite) your source in brackets within the main body of the text. Where you copy words directly from a text you should **indent the margin and put the words copied in quotation marks and cite the page number**, for example:

“Quotes should be used sparingly. They should be succinct and make a point powerfully in words that cannot be improved upon.”
(Payne & Whittaker, 2000, p.139)

*(Full details of this text will then appear in your bibliography thus:
Payne, E & Whittaker, L (2000) 'Developing Essential Study Skills'
Financial Times Prentice Hall, London.*

There may be other occasions where you are merely **paraphrasing** what an author has said, an example of how to cite these sources would be

.....some authors recommend that skim reading is advisable in order to avoid taking unnecessary notes (Payne & Whittaker, 2000, p.158-159)

Bibliography

A bibliography then lists the full details of the texts, journals and newspapers that you have used in your research, whether or not you have referenced them in the text. This should appear at the end of your report.

References

Unless otherwise stated however your tutor will only want you to quote your 'References', i.e. the texts, journals, and newspapers that you have used in your research.

A Webliography' lists details of web pages used. **You must always provide a reference list with any piece of academic work you submit**, plus a webliography where you have used information from web pages.

Within the IBITE Deanery we use the Harvard referencing system. You will get a separate booklet outlining what exactly is required for this.

Briefly this method is illustrated below:

To cite a text:

1. Author's surname and initials
2. Date of publication
3. Title of text
4. Edition (if not the first)
5. Publisher
6. Place of publication

For example:

Armstrong, M (1999) Human Resource Management 7th Edition Kogan Page, London.

Beardwell, I & Holden, L, Clayton, T (2004) Human Resource Management. A Contemporary Approach, 4th Edition, FT Prentice Hall, London.

Bratton, J & Gold, J (2003) Human Resource Management Theory and Practice 3rd Edition, Palgrave Macmillan, Hampshire.

(Reference Lists and Bibliographies are listed in alphabetical order – using the authors surname to sort)

To cite contributions to texts

If quoting a work you found quoted by another author during your reading, be sure to add a note and page number to the entry in your references, so that it is clear that you have not consulted the original source, for example:

Pettijohn *et al.* (2001, cited in Bratton & Gold (2003) found, it is important that the criteria used to assess performance are controllable by those being judged.”

Then within your reference list you would provide the details of both

Pettijohn et al. work and Bratton and Gold's, e.g

References

Bratton, J & Gold, J (2003) Human Resource Management Theory and Practice 3rd Edition, Palgrave Macmillan, Hampshire.

Pettijohn, L.S., Parker. S., Pettijohn. C.E., & Kent, J.L. (2001) Performance Appraisals: usage , criteria and observations. *Journal of Management Development*, 20 (9): 754-71

To cite a journal article:

1. Author's name and initials
2. Date of Publication
3. Title of article
4. Title of Journal
5. Volume number
6. Page numbers

For example

Porter, M.E. (1990) 'The Competitive advantage of Nations' *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 68, No.2. pp.73-93 (Mar-Apr)

To cite a newspaper article:

For attributed articles:

1. Author's name and initials
2. Date of Publication
3. Title of article
4. Title of Newspaper
5. Day/Month
6. Page numbers

WHITE, J. (1992) Liverpool's most valuable home draw. *The Independent*, 2nd. October, p.12

Full details of, unattributed newspaper reports can be included in the text of your report, e.g. (*The Guardian*, 10th October, 2000, p.4)

The title of the article comes first in the bibliography entry and the entry is filed under the title of the newspaper, e.g.

---- (1990) Questions for the decade of decision. *The Guardian*, 25 May, p.17-18

To cite a web page:

1. Surname
2. Forename/Initial
3. Title of Work
4. URL
5. Date of publication or last amendment
6. Date of access.

For Example:

Frost, Betty, A Guide to the Internet, <http://www.hope.ac.uk/IR/ER/InternetResources.html>, 24 December 1999, 2nd February 2000.

Appendices

This section at the end of the report allows you to attach any pertinent additional information that you have referred to in your report. It allows the reader to view one or more of your sources in more detail. An example of the sort of information you **must** put in an appendix is the hard copies of any web pages you have used. However you will not gain marks for the appendices unless you explain them briefly in your report and how they relate to the argument/point you wish to make.

Numbering Systems

You will notice from the example shown below that labelling and navigation is extremely important. Labelling consists of the title, headings and sub-headings, showing the structure and allowing the reader to navigate around the report. This is important because skilled report readers seldom start at the beginning; they may read the summary first, then the recommendations, before moving back to read the body of the report. Clear, explicit headings also help the reader to re-find a section that was read earlier.

It is helpful to have a numbering system to support navigation and to enable both you and your reader to refer to specific sections. The simplest and most widely recognised system is the decimal numbering system with indents, as previously illustrated:

- 1.0 Main Heading 1 (e.g. Terms of Reference)
- 2.0 Main Heading 2 (e.g. Procedures)
 - 2.1 subheading 1 of main heading 2
 - 2.2 subheading 2 of main heading 2
- 3.0 Main Heading 3 (e.g. Findings)
 - 3.1 subheading 1 of main heading 3

Have a closer look at how this worked in the example report given below.

***This is an example of a Business assignment that was set recently.
What follows is a suggestion as to how the report could have been tackled***

View the Recruitment Interview. Your group must then:

1. Identify the errors which the manager makes before and during the interview.
2. Having identified these errors discuss how to avoid such errors in order to conduct an effective recruitment interview.

You must present your group response to these questions in a structured business report of around 2,000 words. Your report **must be supported by academic research** and appropriately referenced.

1.0 Terms of Reference

*This section of a report is normally only 3 or 4 sentences long but it **clearly** sets out.....*

.....the question this report is going to address e.g:

This report will identify the errors which the recruitment manager makes before and during the role play interview. It will then discuss how such errors can be avoided in order to conduct an effective recruitment interview

.....who the report is for (usually your tutor) e.g:

This report is for Tessa Owens

.....what date the report is due, and (submission date)
and is due on the 17th February, 2005.

... ..whether recommendations are included, e.g:

Recommendations will be included to outline how such errors can be avoided in the future.

2.0 Procedure

*This section states how you got the information for this report. You would **briefly** state what procedures you followed. They could include any or all of the following, or perhaps some others not mentioned here, e.g.*

In order to obtain good quality information to answer the question set the following methods have been used:

.....reference to academic texts (**absolutely essential for any academic piece of writing!**) Direct the reader to your see your reference list

.....questionnaire (always show an example of any questionnaires in the appendix)

..... direct observation

..... visit to the organisation

..... review organisations own literature

..... reference to web sites (direct the reader to you webliography - don't forget to put hard copies of any web pages you use in your appendix)

3.0 Findings

This is usually the longest part of any business report and it details 'what you found out!' i.e. the answers to the questions set.

You have two parts of this report to consider, therefore it would be sensible to break this section down into two parts.

Before you address each separate question it would be worth having a paragraph or two here of '**background information**'. This would normally overview the organisation that you are going to discuss **or** in this particular example summarising the recording that you have had to review in order to put this question in context.

3.1 The errors made by the manager

You may feel it appropriate to discuss these errors generally first and then break down your report further into two separate sections that consider

3.1.1. The errors made by the manager before the interview

Discuss these here

3.1.2. The errors made by the manager during the interview.

Discuss these here

3.2 How to avoid such errors in order to conduct an effective recruitment interview.

Discuss these here

4.0 Conclusion

This section is used to briefly summarise the main results found above. It is 'normally' no more than one or two paragraphs in length.

5.0 Recommendations

This section asks you to make recommendations to managers for the future conduct of their organisation, so what you say here will really depend upon what you've found. This section is 'normally' written in point format, but where further explanation is needed this should be provided.