This leaflet will introduce you to what goes into an academic report and how you can go about writing one. Different kinds of reports may require different sections. So, if you want to get good grades, make sure you check your department’s and tutor’s preferences.

Remember, this is a summary, so if you want the full info, visit ‘How to succeed@writing academically’ which you’ll find in succeed@solent on myCourse.

Essay or report

When choosing to write a report or an essay for your assignment you should understand these key differences.

- **Purpose**
  Reports are the presentation and analysis of findings from practical research. They begin with an aim (to investigate, to explore) and probably a hypothesis (a proposition that the research will test). Depending on the guidelines or purpose, a report may make recommendations.

  Essays begin with a question and seek to answer that question based on research into existing theories and through the writer’s own evaluation. An essay may include results of practical research but only in so far as it may help support the writer’s conclusions.

- **Content**
  Reports are generally descriptive, reporting sequential events such as experiments or fixed results from surveys etc. However, they involve evaluation in the conclusion or recommendations sections.

  Essays can be descriptive, discursive, evaluative, etc. This is dependent on the process given in the essay question. Content usually involves a synthesis of knowledge gained from existing texts and from the authors own opinions and argument.

- **Format**
  Both include introductions and conclusions, with the main content, findings, analysis etc. in between.

  However, in a report choice of sections to include will depend on your purpose and tutor’s requirements.

  In an essay, the process given in the question will dictate the way the main body is structured.

When do you use a report?

When you’re told to right? But consider this:

A report is...

- a way to convey the findings of research
- (sometimes) a way to make recommendations based on research
- used in the world of business, government, science, engineering and others
- (at university) a simulation of a real life situation
- aimed towards a practical purpose

This means you should be, and will be, writing reports when you need to carry out a practical investigation and report on your findings.
How to get started on your report

Go through the following questions to identify your goal and some stages to get started on your report. It will be helpful to write your ideas into a ‘Report Writing Plan’ (you’ll find on in ‘How to succeed@report writing’).

What’s the purpose of the report?
It is vital to understand the report’s purpose. Is it:

- To test theories
- To test hypotheses
- To analyse a problem
- To report on experiment findings
- To observe events in the real world
- To observe events in a controlled environment
- To report findings
- To draw conclusions
- To recommend solutions

What type of report is it?
Keep in mind the purpose of your report and its context (e.g. is it a technical subject, social science, business?)

- Technical report
  Generally simulating the reporting process required in industry (e.g. engineering).
- Business report
  Examining a business problem and seeking solutions, or reporting on the condition of a company or a part of a company.
- Case study
  An account of a company, industry, person or project over a given amount of time.
- Field report
  Reporting and reflecting on experiences observed in real life situations, e.g. this may be observing a court session, teaching practice, work experience, etc.
- Scientific report
  Reporting and reflecting on results observed in controlled, scientific conditions, e.g. lab tests, controlled experiments, etc.

There are other types of report; if necessary, consult your tutor. What is important is that you are very clear in your head as to which you are required to write.

What do I need to show?
Based on the type of report you need to write, decide what it is that you want your report to show. Is it:

- The results of your own research
- Your analysis of your own research
- Your analysis of an existing problem or situation
- Your conclusions based on your own analysis
- Your recommendations based on your own conclusions
- Your analysis of existing research and theories
- The synthesis of existing research and theories with your own results and conclusions

What do I need to do?
When you know what kind of report you want to write, and what you want to show in your report, you should be able to decide on which actions you have to take in order to write it. These may include:

- Background reading into existing theories and research
- Analyse the strengths and weaknesses of existing theory and research
- Identify the ‘gap’ in existing theory that your research may fill
- Analyse the case or problem you are studying
- Study similar cases or problems to the one you
- Conduct all of your research activities
- Write up your notes on your research results
- Analyse your research results
- Compare your results with existing theory and research to draw conclusions
- Compare your conclusions with existing conditions or activities in order to make recommendations

Prioritise your actions, write them into your plan and get started on your report!

Which sections to include
It’s important, don’t just guess. Use one of these approaches:

- Read your brief or guidelines - has your tutor told you already?
- Read similar examples - do you have any examples of other student’s work or of similar professional work?
- Go back to your notes - have your lecturers talk about approaches to this kind of report in your lectures
- Use your own judgement - stick your neck out there, think about what the purpose of the report is, and work out what sections will fulfil that.

How to write well
A good report is written with the intention of clarity. Every section must be written in a clear, concise, complete and correct way. In your reports, you must:

- Write with the reader in mind - what can make it easy for the reader to understand?
- Don’t over complicate - state things simply.
- Keep the report as short as possible - don’t pad.
- Be objective, report precisely, evaluate fairly.
- Write in the third person - avoid using ‘I’.
- Use a diagram, table or illustration in the right place for the reader, with the right label.
Report sections

1. Title
Your title is a very clear statement of what the report is about: a short phrase that gives the topic and your approach.

Writing approach: A single phrase or statement.
In every type of report? Yes.
Position: If you’re using a cover page, put the title there. If not, put it above the abstract.

2. Abstract
The abstract allows an interested reader to quickly assess whether they wish to read the whole paper. It is a brief summary of the report. It should refer to the purpose, include the methods used, the most important results and any conclusions or recommendations.

Writing approach: Descriptive. The abstract describes the content of your report.
In every type of report? Most, but some very short reports may not require one.
Position: The first section of your report. If you don’t have a cover page, then the title of the paper can go above the abstract. 150-200 words is common.

3. Introduction
The introduction serves as an expansion of your title – giving a bit more detail about the problem or question you are tackling in the paper. It should make a very clear statement of your purpose - Why did you carry out the research? Why are you writing this report?

You should also indicate the scope of your research, the sections to be included and the background to the topic. Any key terms can be defined here.

Writing approach: Descriptive.
In every type of report? Yes
Position: The introduction comes at the beginning of the paper, immediately after the abstract.

4. Literature survey
This section describes the existing and established theory and research in your report area. It can be used to show where you are filling a perceived gap in the existing knowledge, or how you are proposing something that goes against or is controversial to existing ideas. You must reference all sources.

Writing approach: Descriptive.
In every type of report? No. In a lot of professional reports this section is not necessary. However, for the majority of academic reports it is.
Position: After the introduction and before the methodology.

5. Methodology
Here you should explain what methods you used in researching and developing your report.

Writing approach: Descriptive.
In every type of report? Usually, yes. The only exceptions may be in a professional situation where the method of collecting data will be so familiar as to be unnecessary to describe.
Position: Following the introduction (and Literature survey if one is included)

6. Results
Describe everything you find out through your research: all of the results given in an objective and factual way. You may include tables, graphs or illustrations to make it easier for the reader. Do not include any discussion, argument or conclusions - those come later.

Writing approach: Descriptive.
In every type of report? Yes.
Position: Central to the report. Will come after the Introduction. Must come directly before the Discussion.

7. Discussion
Here you interpret your own understanding of what the results of your research show. Contextualise your ideas in relation to other theories and with other similar research.

Writing approach: Discursive and evaluative.
In every type of report? Yes.
Position: Following the Results.

8. Conclusions
Define what your research showed in relation to your aims. Did you meet your aims, go beyond them, or in fact fail to reach your aims?

Writing approach: Evaluative and argumentative.
In every type of report? No. Depends on purpose.
Position: Following the Discussion.

9. Recommendations
If the report provides information on an area for which future decisions will need to be made, then you should include recommendations. They must be cross referenced to the part of the paper that gives evidence for them. Number each recommendation separately.

Writing approach: Evaluative.
In every type of report? No. Depends on purpose. Check with your tutor.
Position: Following the Conclusions.
Report sections (continued)

10. Reference list
A detailed list for all source materials you used. You must also give references for any tables, graphs or illustrations you have copied from another source.

Writing approach: List

In every type of report? At university, yes.

Position: The last section, unless you have appendices.

11. Appendices
You can put as an appendix any material relating to the research and the report that does not fit easily or suitably in the body of the paper. Very often this will be the functional data used to carry out your research, such as your survey questionnaires or observation sheets. You may also include some supplementary data that, while not essential to the understanding of the report, does add useful information or insight. Make sure you number and title each individual appendix and start each on a new page.

Writing approach: Dependent on content and purpose. Usually either examples of documents used in the research process or descriptions of extra details.

In every type of report? No. Only when necessary.

Position: Always the final section of your report.

Avoid plagiarism

Plagiarism is a real problem in university writing. It’s a problem for you because if you do it, you could lose marks, not have your essay marked at all, or in the worst case, be expelled from the university.

To avoid plagiarism, you must give other people’s writing in quotations and paraphrase. When you do so, you must say in the report where you took the words or ideas from. A reference is a note of the author, text title, publisher, etc. of your source material. A reference list is a list of all of the sources you have referred to which you put at the end of your report.

You must know what reference system your department prefers you to use. At Solent University, the majority of subjects use the Harvard Referencing System. However, there are also at least two other methods in use: APA for psychology students and the Law system. There are detailed explanations of how to use each of these in the tutorial ‘How to succeed@referencing’, which you can find in succeed@research on myCourse.

Get the content right

Unlike an essay, where you have to make decisions about your structure and the flow of argument, in a report, the content is dictated by the structure of your paper. Each section of the report has a distinct purpose, so the way to write it is clearly defined. However, there are some other things to consider when report writing:

Questions to ask yourself

To ensure that you are planning and writing the correct content for your report, ask yourself these questions:

1. Is the format of the report pre-defined?
2. What are the departmental requirements?
3. Has your tutor told you what type of report you are expected to write?
4. How much ‘freedom’ do you have to decide on the content?
5. Can you get examples of previous reports?
6. Are there industry standards for these reports?

Seek out answers from these sources:

- Your own tutor
- Other lecturers
- Classmates
- Your own reflection
- Source material in the library
- Source material on the Internet

Do the ground work

The work you do will be determined by the nature of the subject you are studying and the purpose of the research. You may need to do one or more of these:

- Analyse an existing case or problem;
- Create a set of test conditions to examine;
- Observe conditions or behaviour in a natural environment;
- Conduct surveys;
- Conduct interviews;
- Conduct experiments.

Analysis, evaluation, discussion, comparison to theory, conclusions and recommendations arise from the work that you carry out in advance of writing the report.

Further help

Visit succeed@solent for further information and downloadable resources.

Contact your Learning Skills Tutors, Carina Buckley and Helen Capstick, in ML002 for further guidance and support.

Email: succeed@solent.ac.uk