Writing Reports

What is a report?

Dictionary definition "Tell about what happened:- to give information about something that has happened."

A report is a written document (usually formal) designed to:

- ♦ To inform, explain or persuade. To transmit ideas or information, facts or findings
- ♦ To research or define a problem and draw conclusions about it
- ♦ To make recommendations about ways of doing things, making improvements or changes
- ♦ To record information for other people to refer to

What kind of report do they need?

If ever you are confronted with the task of writing a report and you are unsure of how to go about it, here are some tips.

It's common to be asked to write reports in business and organisations, for all kinds of reasons. Sometimes reports are requested with clear terms of reference and criteria, but mostly they are not. It's common for reports to be requested with only a vague idea given as to what is actually needed - commonly there is no written 'brief' or specification.

Many people new to report-writing think that it's not the done thing to ask what the report should look like, often for fear of appearing unsure or incapable. But the fact is that before writing reports or business plans of any sort the writer **should always** first seek clarification of exactly what's required. Ask whoever has requested the report for their ideal format and if appropriate ask for examples of what they consider a suitable format for them.   If there is no suggested format, use the guidelines we have given to create a basic report structure you'll have a good basis to start with.

Sample reports from other industries and organisations are not always very helpful. Sample reports from completely different situations can be very misleading, there are so many different types of reports and report formats that there's no guarantee that an example from elsewhere would be right for your particular situation(s).

Discuss and agree the report specification with the person requesting it - if they aren't sure themselves, then help them to define the criteria by asking helpful questions, such as:

- ♦ Is there a written specification or 'terms of reference' for this report?
- ♦ Where did the original request for this report come from and what do you think they expect and need?
- ♦ Can we find out more about what is expected from this report?
- ♦ How many words or pages?
- ♦ Who is this report for and what will they use it for?
- ♦ What format do you (or they) prefer?
- ♦ Do you want recommendations and actions in the report? Or just a conclusion?
- ♦ Do you want detail referenced and appended or available on request?
- ♦ Is this report really truly necessary? - might there be a better quicker more effective way to give the person asking for it what they actually need, whatever that is?

The answers to the above questions will form the "brief" for your report.

Report Writing ... continued

Starting the report

Now that you have clarified your brief and know exactly what is expected of your report you can begin your report but there is still a lot to think about:

- Research the topic
- Collect and analyse evidence
- Think about the audience who will read the report, and write clearly in a way they will understand
- Keep it simple and try not to jargonise
- Be precise
- Write a plan detailing the information headings you need to include
- As you collect your information, note where it came from - author, title, date, publisher, place of publication
- Do not write in the first person
- Present work in the correct format

How Reports are read

It will help if you think about the way reports are used so you can design your report to catch the attention of the reader.

A report is not normally read from start to finish like a book. It needs to be designed for random access.

People read the sections of a report with the following priority:

Summary ("What's it all about?")
Introduction / conclusions ("So briefly what is it trying to tell me?")
Main body ("Well some bits look interesting so I shall dip in here")
Appendix ("I need to find out more about that!")

You need to consider your audience and convey information fast and accurately.

A detailed contents page will help the reader find the information they want quickly and easily.

Use meaningful headings and numbered sections to help the reader access information

Don't ramble!

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Report Writing ... continued

Suggested layout of a report

We have included a basic suggested layout for a report, however you should always agree a layout with whoever has asked for the report.

Checklist for Report Writing

Confirm" Brief "or "Terms of Reference"	
Draft outline template and agree it	
Collect information	
First draft of report	
Read and fine tune	
Second draft of report	
Proof read by an independent person for constructive feedback	
Final draft	
Proof read again before submitting the report	

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