

Finishing touches

If you're going to go to the trouble of writing an excellent report, it's a shame to spoil it with careless finishing. If you give yourself time to check details you can make your presentation as good as your content.

Referencing – Your course handbook should explain the style of referencing preferred by your department. Check that you have all the necessary details in the right places. If you've lost the details of a source, don't include it – unacknowledged sources could be read as plagiarism.

Proof reading – Print your work off to proof read – you are more likely to spot errors. It can help to read aloud. Use spell and grammar checkers wisely – make sure changes won't affect what you wanted to say.

Title page, contents, list of illustrations – Not all reports will need all of these sections. If yours does, they will probably be the last sections to write, once you are certain that the page order will not change.

Top tip...

A well presented report looks professional and gives the impression that its author cared about getting things right – you can lose marks by not doing this properly! Check whether your department has advice on the exact format. Much of the information you will need will be accessible online, on Blackboard or your Dept's website. If you can't find information about deadlines, referencing etc, ask someone. Don't guess – guessing wrong could cost you marks.

For more information....

See **Report writing 1. Features of good reports.**

See **Report writing 2. Structuring your report.**

www.learnhigher.ac.uk/learningareas/reportwriting/betterreportwriting.htm

For more on this and other aspects of academic study, see our website at www.reading.ac.uk/studyadvice

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Writing your report



Report writing 3

This guide is the third of three on report writing at university. It includes:

- Good writing style
- Writing academically
- Finishing touches

Good writing style

When you write a report you are communicating your knowledge about a set of actions to a reader. The key here is **communication**. A good piece of advice is to 'write to express, not to impress'. Here are some tips for achieving this:

- Write in paragraphs which have one main point that you introduce, expand on, and summarise.
- Using shorter sentences avoids over-complexity.
- Avoid using colloquialisms and informality in academic writing.
- Write words out in full, for instance use 'do not' instead of 'don't'.
- Do use appropriate technical terms, but try to avoid jargon – consider who is likely to read your report and whether they will understand the terms you use.
- If you're not sure how to use punctuation, see the Study Advice website for advice and links on Academic Writing.

Writing academically

Writing academically means writing in such a way that your information sounds credible and authoritative. It does not mean:



- Using long words
- Writing complicated sentences with lots of semi-colons and colons

Some suggestions for writing academically:

Be objective – report what the evidence tells you even if it isn't what you hoped to find. Don't present unsupported or personal opinions: for instance, 'Unsurprisingly, participants who recycled their refuse more regularly were also nicer people'. Take a balanced view.

Be accurate – give clear non-subjective descriptions ('light blue' is better than 'sky blue') and definite figures ('after twenty five minutes', '80% of the participants'). Avoid vague or ambiguous terms like 'a long period of time', or 'most of the participants'.

Be direct – don't leave it to your reader to work out what you are saying! Putting the emphasis on a strong verb can help the reader to see the important points: for instance, 'an analysis was performed on the results' is not as direct as 'the results were analysed'.

Be critical – evaluate your own work as well as that of others. Have the confidence to say if something could have been done better if it had been done differently.

Be appropriate – identify the purpose of your communication and the audience you are communicating to. Give them the information they need to understand your work.

It always used to be recommended in academic writing that you used the passive voice – in other words, 'the experiment was conducted' rather than 'we conducted the experiment'. Many people recognise now that this can make writing pompous and overly complicated. It's worth considering whether using the active voice (i.e. I did, we did) will make the actions you are reporting easier to understand. Check any instructions you have for guidelines on this - if in doubt, use the passive voice.

Writing your report

Reports are written to describe work completed in response to a particular brief, either one that has been given to you, or one you have set up yourself. So:

- **write in the past tense** (as you are reporting on what has happened)
- **always bear the brief in mind while you are writing**

An important difference between essays and reports to bear in mind:

- essays are written in a single narrative voice from beginning to end
- reports are written in sections which may use different styles of writing, depending on the purpose of the section

So, for instance, your Methods and Results sections will be descriptive, your Introduction will be explanatory, and your Literature Review and Discussion sections will be analytical.

See **Report writing 2. Structuring your report** for more on sections.

Here is a suggested order for writing the main sections:

1. **Methods and Data/Results:** As a rough guide, the more factual the section, the earlier you should write it. So sections describing 'what you did and what you found' are likely to be written first.
2. **Introduction and Literature Survey:** Sections that explain or expand on the purpose of the research should be next: what questions are you seeking to answer, how did they arise, why are they worth investigating? These will help you to see how to interpret and analyse your findings.
3. **Discussion:** Once you've established the questions your research is seeking to answer, you will be able to see how your results contribute to the answers, and what kind of answers they point to. Write this early enough that you still have time to fill any gaps you find.
4. **Conclusions and Recommendations:** These should follow logically from your Discussion. They should state your conclusions and recommendations clearly and simply.
5. **Abstract/Executive Summary:** Once the main body is finished you can write a succinct and accurate summary of the main features.