

REPORT WRITING

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Basically, a report presents in writing the facts about a subject or activity. Whether financial, technical, scientific, or administrative, a report should be strictly objective. The writer may conclude by making an assessment of his own findings, but the facts he presents in his report should speak for themselves. Associated with objectivity in report writing is factual accuracy. Facts are either true or false; every effort should be made to check the accuracy of facts used in a report by consulting reference works and authorities as well as by personal research and calculations. How detailed or extensive should a report be? Like its title, a report should be as brief yet fully informative as possible. Usually, the terms of reference will help determine the range and scope of a report. For example, a survey of 'The City Bus Service' will obviously be less extensive than a survey of 'The South African Railway System'. Above all, a report should make sense. Scientific and technical reports refer to highly specialised subjects and contain a great deal of specialised terminology, but if their meaning is confused by inexact writing or unnecessarily pretentious jargon they are of very little use.

The layout of a report will vary from subject to subject. Try, however, to give an indication of the purpose of your report as this can be lost sight of in subsequent discussions. This motivation (sometimes referred to as 'a statement of submittal') can appear at the head of the report or be attached separately. Captions and sub-headings often help to signpost aspects of your argument; if you use them, see that they are worded correctly and that they stand apart from the text. Where reports involve comparative figures or related values, tables and graphs will assist the reader to visualise the contrast being made. Tables should, as far as possible, be self-explanatory. The same applies to any line, bar, or circle graphs used. Present only the essential facts, and do so in a simple and clear way. The complexity of some reports calls for a

summary of the major points discussed. This is particularly useful if the report exceeds 1500 words. A paragraph or two is all that is needed to bring together the essential facts. The summary, like the motivation of a report, can be a separate section or it can form an integral part of the text.

The need for clear, precise expression in report writing is paramount. A statement such as the following makes confusion worse confounded: 'The increased mass/weight ratio achieved in terms of its energy component is a feature of particles acted on by linear accelerators'. Why not say: 'Particles moving in a linear accelerator gain energy'? Generally speaking, report writers should use the active rather than the passive voice. 'Statistics show' is preferable to 'it is shown by statistics'. Because reports are in themselves abstractions of things seen and heard, there is a tendency to use abstract terms willy-nilly in their composition. To use, for example, 'a cessation of bridge-building has taken place' instead of 'bridge-building has stopped', or 'the circumstance of the customer's refusal to pay his account' instead of 'the customer's refusal to pay his account'. Abstractions are often necessary in order to generalise about facts, but should never be preferred to concrete statements. Simplicity wherever possible, is always to be recommended.

Documentation is usually part of report writing, and follows certain conventions. Titles of books are underlined or italicised. Titles of articles taken from books are placed within quotation marks. For example, Johnson's article on 'Annual Rainfall in the Transvaal' appeared in *The South African Geographical Digest*. Where only part of a quotation is given, use three periods if the missing words occur within the quotation. Like this: 'The case for resident mine-workers has ... been put to the Government ...' Although there are differences of opinion about how figures should be given in the text of a report, the general rule is to write any number over ten as a figure, especially if the report is mainly technical. Cross-references to material already used in a report may be simplified by the citations *op. cit.* or *ibid.* followed by a page or line number. The main aim in documentation, as in the other aspects of report writing discussed, is to provide concise information.

[Suggestions from readers about alternative practices and approaches will be most welcome. Eds.]