

Study Skills: Reports

Video transcript

When we consider writing at university, many people immediately think of essays. However, at university you may find many different types of written assessments. One of the most common is the report.

If you are studying courses such as business, accounting, science, health, information technology or engineering, you will write many reports. These will prepare you for life after graduation when your professional communication skills will be invaluable.

Depending on your career, you may produce environmental reports to regulators, annual reports to shareholders, project proposals, interim reports, case studies, lab reports, or theses. Your university assessments are likely to reflect this range.

When you are writing a report, you must consider several questions: First, what is the purpose of the report? Second, what is the required structure of the report? Third, who are the readers and what do they need to know?

Reports often have a specific purpose so this means they can be quite different to essays. Many essays are written to present and defend an argument. In contrast, many reports are written to address a problem. They may also present experimental, investigative or research findings. Thus, they often present facts, evaluate the facts, and then draw conclusions or make recommendations.

The structure of reports is very important. Each discipline, each profession and many of your future employers require you to use a specific structure and layout. At university, your lecturer may provide a layout for you to follow or even a template to use. If you are not sure, ask.

In general, all reports contain three elements: preliminary matter, the body of the report and end matter. Here are some examples: preliminary matter could include items such as a title page, table of contents, acknowledgments or an abstract.

The report body could include items such as an introduction, clear sections with headings and subheadings, and conclusions or recommendations.

End matter could include items such as appendices, reference lists or glossaries.

It is important to think carefully about your readers. Your readers will affect the language you use and your choice of layout. As a student, your main reader will be your lecturer but when you write reports for assessment, you should imagine who your reader would be in your profession.

Here's one example: engineers may write a project report that will be read by clients who don't share their knowledge of engineering. Thus, they need to write clearly and concisely, avoid jargon or complex terminology, and use graphics to give visual support to help convey important data that can be understood by non-engineers.

Here's another example: a marketing graduate may write a campaign report that will be read by time-poor managers within their company. They need to present the campaign results and recommendations in a way that allows busy readers to quickly locate and observe the main points. This means that executive summaries, content pages, clear headings, images and bullet points are very helpful.

This video has provided an overview of reports, their purpose, their structure and their readers. Don't forget to speak to a Language and Learning Advisor if you need more help.