Introduction: a video overview of report writing

Section 1: Getting started

From the day you walk into university until the day you leave, there are many reports you'll have to write. As a student, these reports might be the bane of your life - but the truth is, you'll have to write them no matter where you go. From a simple work assessment report to the high-flying technical write-up, reports are a common form of workplace communication. You may have to write a report to a 'client' or an assessing manager. Report writing is an essential skill for professionals; master it now and writing reports won't have to be a pain. Here's where to start.

How do I consider the audience?

As you write, ask yourself:

- Why have they asked for a report?
- What do they need to know?
- How will they use the report?

Throughout your study and future career you will write reports for people who have little or no background in the area of work your report covers. If this is your audience, then your report should be easy to understand. Define terms, offer some background knowledge and use relevant examples. For example, an environmental impact statement for a newspaper would be written in a style that best suits the non-technical reader.

On the other hand, if you are writing a technical report intended to be read by a team of engineers, you can assume a level of prior knowledge and use specialised technical language. Someone expert and knowledgeable in your own field will not necessarily look upon your work kindly if you write your report with a layperson in mind.

How do I analyse my task?

Analysing your task is very important. If you haven't got a clear picture in your mind of where you want to go, planning the report is going to be difficult. So, here are some questions you should ask yourself:

- Do you understand the type of report needed? (e.g. experimental report, design proposal, etc.)
- Do you know how big your report needs to be?
- Do you know what is required in the report?
- Who is my audience? (e.g. clients, lecturers, assessors, managers etc.)
- What is the problem/question?
- What is the aim of the report?
- What key points or issues need addressing?
- What information do you need to collect?

Now that you've got these basic ideas in mind, how and where will you find the relevant information?

How do I clarify my aim?

The aim of your report should be clear from the type of report needed. In an experimental report the aim is very different
Experimental Report

An experimental report aims to report on:
- an experiment or research.
- what was achieved during the course of the experiment.
- what was concluded and how this compares with previous published results.

Technical design report

A Technical design report aims to:
- solve a problem or;
- recommend a design

What is the basic structure of a report?

Types of reports can vary greatly; they can range from an experimental report to an environmental impact statement. There is however, a basic structure common to most reports, irrespective of their type.

Major components of a general report

Title Page

Abstract
- In less than 200 words ... what was the problem, how was it investigated, what did you find out and what do your findings mean?

Table of Contents
- A list of the major and minor sections of your report.

Introduction
- Set the scene; give some background information about the topic. State the aim/purpose of the investigation. Outline the body sections.

Main Body
- Organise the sections in a logical sequence: what you investigated, what you found, what interpretations and what judgements you made. Use short informative headings and subheadings.

Conclusion
- What has been achieved and what is the significance of your findings and your discussion? Have your aims been successful or not?

Recommendations
- What do you recommend as a course of action following your conclusion?

References
A list of all the sources you used.

Appendices

- Any information (graphs, charts, tables or other data) you used in your report but did not include in the body.

See next: Writing the report