

REPORT WRITING: STANDARD FORMAT

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Introduction

Report writing is a time consuming business so it is a great shame if, having devoted all that time to writing your report, the quality is such that hardly anyone can be bothered to read it. Quite frankly, most report readers do not actually read all the report; they are too short of time. You might as well know it and accept it -- that is normal. They only read the parts that interest them. Frequently these are the summary, the conclusions and recommendations.

Of course, some readers do need all the details you so carefully included, they are specialists, but most do not. Most readers just need two things: that the information they want is where they expect it to be so they can find it, and that it is written clearly so that they can understand it.

It is similar to reading a newspaper. You expect the news headlines to be on the front page; the sports coverage to be at the back; the TV listings on page whatever and the editorial comment in the middle. If what you want is not in its usual place then you have to hunt for it and you may get irritated. So it is with a report.

There is a convention as to what goes where. Stick with the convention and please your readers. Break the convention and people may get slightly irritated – and bin your report.

So what is that convention, the standard format?

Standard Sections

Title Section. In a short report this may simply be the front cover. In a long one it could also include Terms of Reference, Table of Contents and so on.

Summary. Give a clear and very concise account of the main points, main conclusions and main recommendations. Keep it very short, a few percent of the total length. Some people, especially senior managers, may not read anything else so write as if it were a stand-alone document. It isn't but for some people it might as well be. Keep it brief and free from jargon so that anyone can understand it and get the main points. Write it last, but do not copy and paste from the report itself; that rarely works well.

Introduction. This is the first part of the report proper. Use it to paint the background to 'the problem' and to show the reader why the report is important to them. Give your terms of reference (if not in the Title Section) and explain how the details that follow are arranged. Write it in plain English.

Main Body. This is the heart of your report, the facts. It will probably have several sections or sub-sections each with its own subtitle. It is unique to your report and will describe what you discovered about 'the problem'.

These sections are most likely to be read by experts so you can use some appropriate jargon but explain it as you introduce it. Arrange the information logically, normally putting things in order of priority -- most important first. In fact, follow that advice in every section of your report.

You may choose to include a Discussion in which you explain the significance of your findings.

Conclusions. Present the logical conclusions of your investigation of 'the problem'. Bring it all together and maybe offer options for the way forward. Many people will read this section. Write it in plain English. If you have included a discussion then this section may be quite short.

Recommendations. What do you suggest should be done? Don't be shy; you did the work so state your recommendations in order of priority, and in plain English.

Appendices. Put the heavy details here, the information that only specialists are likely to want to see. As a guide, if some detail is essential to your argument then include it in the main body, if it merely supports the argument then it could go in an appendix.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In conclusion, remember that readers expect certain information to be in certain places. They do not expect to hunt for what they want and the harder you make it for them the more likely they are to toss your report to one side and ignore it. So what should you do?

1. Follow the generally accepted format for a report: Summary, Introduction, Main Body, Conclusions, Recommendations and Appendices.
2. Organise your information in each section in a logical fashion with the reader in mind, usually putting things in order of priority – most important first.

Good luck with your report writing!