Writing Reports

There are several basic formats or approaches to writing reports. The type that you use will depend on how formal the report needs to be, and how much detail your readers need. You can write internal reports (memorandum report), a letter style report, a short report, or a formal report.

Reports typically make use of headings and subheadings to separate the information. This gives your reader a break from reading solid pages of text and also allows people to find what they want to read quickly.

Typically, a longer, more formal report has the following parts.

* Cover: Includes the name of the organization, your department, and the title of the report.
* Letter of Transmittal: Explains how, why, and under what circumstances the report was prepared.
* Title Page: Title of the report, who the report was prepared for (name and title of recipient), author’s name, and date.
* Synopsis or Executive Summary: An informative summary covering the purpose of the report as well as key findings, conclusions, and recommendations.
* Table of Contents: Contains main divisions with page numbers.
* List of Illustrations: Needed only if there are many illustrations and graphs.
* Introduction: Includes whatever the reader needs in order to understand the report, such as the background, scope, limitations, details about your approach or method, and criteria used in making your evaluation.

Body/Discussion

Summary

Conclusions

Recommendations

* Appendix: May include statistics, tables, and other information of interest to only some readers (so it would not be appropriate in the body of the report).
* Very extensive reports may also contain footnotes and a bibliography.

Shorter, less formal reports will include only some items from this list.

Documentation

If you use data from secondary sources when you are preparing your report or your business case, the data must be documented, meaning the souce of that information must be cited. Using someone else’s ideas without giving credit for them is plagiarism. Even when you paraphrase and put others ideas in your own words, they should be documented.

Use direct quotations sparingly. There are three situations when you will find it useful to quote someone’s exact words: when they are an expert and you want to emphasize their opinion; when you want to use their exact words before you criticize them; or you want to repeat identical phrasing because of its precision, clarity, or aptness.

This isn’t a fun part of writing, but it does have its uses. Citing sources strengthens your arguments and shield you from carges of plagiarism.

The greatest challenge is that all business writers do not follow the same formatting style. Some companies who do a lot of report writing will specify a particular style. Styles continue to evolve, which makes things a little more complicated.

There are a couple of frequently used style guides, particularly in North America, including:

* American Psychological Association (APA)
* Chicago Manual of Style
* Modern Language Association Method (MLA)

Electronic sources generally follow print source formatting, although you won’t often have page numbers. You should also include the date that you accessed the information. You must include the entire URL since sources can be moved.

There are also many academic disciplines (including science, legal, journalistic, government, medicine, business, and industry) that require a particular style depending on their documentation system. These can vary around the world.

For the most recent updates, we suggest that beore you start your documentation, you refer to the actual handbooks, Internet sites, or subscribe to current versions of the text that you need.

As with many of the rules we cite with writing, the important thing is to be consistent. Don’t mix two or more styles within one document. As you can see on the next page, different styles can lead to very different results.

One author, in Chicago Manual style:

Lynne Truss. *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation* , New York, Gotham Books, 1993

One author, in American Psychological Association (APA) style:

Truss, Lynne (1993). *Eats, shoots & leaves: The zero tolerance approach to punctuation*. New York, Gotham Books, 1993

One author, in British Broadcasting Corporation News Style Guidelines:

Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation, Lynne Truss, Gotham Books, New York, 1993