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**STRUCTURE OF REPORTS**

A key feature of reports is that they are formally structured in sections. The use of sections makes it easy for the reader to jump straight to the information they need.

Unlike an essay which is written in a single narrative style from start to finish, each section of a report has its own purpose and will need to be written in an appropriate style to suit – for example, the methods and results sections are mainly descriptive, whereas the discussion section needs to be analytical.

Understanding the function of each section will help you to structure your information and use the correct writing style. Reports for different briefs require different sections, so always check carefully any instructions you've been given.

**Title**

The title needs to concisely state the topic of the report. It needs to be informative and descriptive so that someone just reading the title will understand the main issue of your report. You don’t need to include excessive detail in your title but avoid being vague and too general.

**Abstract**

(Also called the Summary or Executive Summary)

This is the ‘shop window’ for your report. It is the first (and sometimes the only) section to be read and should be the last to be written. It should enable the reader to make an informed decision about whether they want to read the whole report. The length will depend on the extent of the work reported but it is usually a paragraph or two and always less than a page.

A good way to write an abstract is to think of it as a series of brief answers to questions. These would probably include:

 What is the purpose of the work?

 What methods did you use for your research?

 What were the main findings and conclusions reached as a result of your research?

 Did your work lead you to make any recommendations for future actions?

**Discussion**

This is probably the longest section and worth spending time on. It brings everything together, showing how your findings respond to the brief you explained in your introduction and the previous research you surveyed in your literature survey. It should be written in a discursive style, meaning you need to discuss not only what your findings show but why they show this, using evidence from previous research to back up your explanations.

This is also the place to mention if there were any problems (for instance, if your results were different from expectations, you couldn’t find important data, or you had to change your method) and how they were or could have been solved.

**Conclusion**

Your conclusions should be a short section with no new arguments or evidence. Sum up the main points of your research - how do they answer the original brief for the work reported on?

***Which section should I write first?***

It can be helpful to write up sections as you go along. This means that you write about what you've done while it's still fresh in your mind and you can see more easily if there are any gaps that might need additional research to fill them. In addition, you don't end up with a large piece of writing to do in one go - that can be overwhelming.

**Here is a suggested order for writing the main sections:**

1. Methods and Data/Results: As a rough guide, the more factual the section, the earlier you should write it. So sections describing ‘what you did and what you found’ are likely to be written first.

2. Introduction and Literature Survey: Sections that explain or expand on the purpose of the research should be next. What questions are you seeking to answer, how did they arise, why are they worth investigating?

These will help you to see how to interpret and analyse your findings.

3. Discussion: Once you’ve established the questions your research is seeking to answer, you will be able to see how your results contribute to the answers and what kind of answers they point to. Write this early enough that you still have time to fill any gaps you find.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations: These should follow logically from your Discussion. They should state your conclusions and recommendations clearly and simply.

5. Abstract/Executive Summary: Once the main body is finished you can write a succinct and accurate summary of the main features.

**General Writing Tips**

1. You have a deadline to meet;
2. So you have to plan the writing carefully;
3. The writing will be the most difficult part –so concentrate on this the most;
4. Avoid slang, abbreviations (unless your formerly define these) etc;
5. Do not waffle in the write up –be concise;
6. Try to use academic English;
7. Avoid unscientific words like: I “got” this result and it seemed “weird” as yesterday the results looked more “awesome”;
8. Write in the past tense–you read the document before you did the write up!
9. Use section numbers and sub section numbers;
10. Try to make the report look presentable and tidy;
11. Each section should start with an introduction sentence/paragraph and have a summary sentence/paragraph at the end;
12. Avoid personalizing the report e.g. “I did this” or “Fred messed up the analysis by….”
13. Avoid split infinitives e.g. “To boldly go where no man has gone before” should read: “To go boldly where no man has gone before”.