

## Writing a useful report

### Defining the purpose

There are three common reasons for writing a report:

- ◆ to inform
- ◆ to explain
- ◆ to persuade

Defining the main purpose of a report will determine the kind of report that is needed. If the purpose is to inform, a factual report providing an accurate record is needed. If the purpose is to explain, an instructional report providing a step-by-step account is needed. And if the purpose is to persuade, a 'leading' report is required, leading the reader to a point of decision.

Reports that seek to persuade are often the most difficult to write. The writer needs to inform to ensure a common understanding, and explain his/her perspective on the situation in order to persuade the reader to agree to do something.

### Identifying the reader

It is vital to identify the reader/s. For example, if they are all experts in the subject area of the report, jargon is acceptable and, indeed, expected. However, if the readers are new to the subject area of the report, the language used will need to be free of industry jargon.

Three questions:

**1. What does the reader know?**

The aim is to communicate starting at the reader's current level of knowledge.

**2. What are the reader's attitudes?**

The reader's interests as well as their known likes and dislikes are worth noting.

**3. What does the reader want?**

This is a difficult question to answer, particularly when writing for a varied readership. In this case, consider what the reader who is most important to you wants.



*'Writing a useful report' takes you through defining the purpose, identifying the reader/s, setting the objective, gathering the material, and planning the structure for your report. It provides you with four key stages to consider: investigating, planning, writing and revising. And it ends by giving you nine reasons why many reports fail – things to avoid!*

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One more important question after identifying the reader:

Is a report actually the best way to communicate?

## Setting the objective

Having established the purpose and the audience, consider what you want the reader to think and do after reading the report. To think about the objective, complete a sentence such as this:

I want the report to persuade (purpose) the managing director (the audience) to . . . (the objective) e.g. authorise a system of flexible working hours

*What do you want the reader to think and do?*

One more important question before moving on:

Is a report actually the best way to achieve this objective?

## Gathering material

1. Keep it straightforward. Reject the irrelevant. Agonise over the doubtful. Include the essential.
2. Provide facts that back up your conclusions *and state their sources*.

## Planning the structure

Planning the structure is about using the facts to lead and guide the reader. It is about creating a route map *before starting to write*.

Create the framework for your report with care, and the rest will follow. Forgetting the structure is like trying to build a car without a chassis.

### *The structure*

- ◆ Title page: clear layout, brief descriptive title, date.
- ◆ Contents page: key sections, headings, and subheadings, appendices, exhibits laid out clearly so relationships between the elements are evident.
- ◆ Executive summary: essential if it is a long document and for busy people (and who isn't?). Write this section only after completing the rest of the document.

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- ◆ Introduction: Who requested the report? Why? Links with earlier reports? What are the objectives of this report? What follows?
  - ◆ Main body:
    1. Situation: a short, factual description.
    2. Implications: what is wrong and why it is wrong.
    3. Possibilities: realistic alternative courses of actions and their costs and benefits.
    4. Recommendations: what should be done and why it should be done.
  - ◆ Conclusions: brief with no new material, acknowledge help given, restate benefits and recommendations, end on positive note.
  - ◆ Bibliography: where the report uses a lot of data, it makes sense to show the reader where this data comes from. Showing your sources gives credibility to your report.
  - ◆ Appendices: include as many appendices as there are types of information and may be of use to different readers. Avoid the mistake of putting all detailed information in *one* appendix.
  - ◆ Glossary: a glossary is occasionally helpful where, for example, the majority of the readers have a technical background and would expect industry jargon while a few readers do not have that background.

*Investigate, plan,  
write, revise*

## Four key stages in preparing a report

### 1. Investigating

Define the purpose and collect information

### 2. Planning

Review relevance of information to reader

Sort information into section and write headings

Decide on a logical progression

Never write anything before you are sure that:

- ◆ You are clear about your main message.
- ◆ You have all the relevant information to hand.
- ◆ You have organised your ideas.
- ◆ You know the order in which you plan to present your message.

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### 3. Writing

This is about ensuring the ideas and information is presented clearly and comprehensively

### 4. Revising

If at all possible, leave a gap of a few days between completing writing the first draft and then revising the document. Also, allow enough time to ask a colleague to read and comment on your document.

## Reasons why reports fail

- ◆ Purpose unclear
- ◆ Reader taken by surprise, unprepared
- ◆ Aim not achieved in eyes of reader
- ◆ Scope too wide ranging
- ◆ Incomplete data
- ◆ Badly-arranged data
- ◆ Illogical analysis
- ◆ Inappropriate conclusions
- ◆ No call to action

*Keep the reader in mind at all times*