

## Written assignments

# Reports and essays: key differences

**Please note!** This handout describes *general* features of academic reports. It is very likely that in your specific discipline only some of these features will apply – and there may be other requirements not included here. Departmental requirements for reports especially vary widely, so **please do check your course or unit handbook**, or ask a subject tutor or lecturer.

The following table is adapted from Cottrell, 2003, p. 209.

Reports	Essays
Reports often originate from outside the academic world: they are typical of writing required for the world of work.	Essays originate in academic settings: they are rarely used anywhere else.
Reports often present data and findings that you have collected yourself, for example through a survey, experiment or case study, or by applying theory to your workplace.	Essays focus on analysing or evaluating theory, past research by other people, and ideas. They seldom present the findings of newly conducted research.
Essays and reports have different structures – see overleaf.	Essays and reports have different structures – see overleaf.
A report is divided into separate, headed (and sometimes numbered) sections and sub-sections.	Essays do not usually have sections; they flow as a continuous piece of writing.
A report may contain tables, charts and diagrams.	Essays do not usually include tables, charts or diagrams.
Reports usually include descriptions of the methods used (e.g. 'I observed') <sup>1</sup>	Essays should not refer to the method used in arriving at conclusions.
The description in a report often includes comment on how the research could be improved and extended.	Essays are not usually reflective about the process of researching and writing the essay itself.
Reports often include recommendations for action.	Essays do not include recommendations.

<sup>1</sup> In a report you may need to write about your own actions, especially if describing primary research methods. (In a **reflective report** you also need to write about yourself as a learner.) This means that it *may* (do check your handbook) be acceptable in reports to use the **first person** ('I', 'me' and 'my', or 'we', 'our' and 'us' if you're working in a team). It is very rarely acceptable to use the first person in essays, however.

Reference: Cottrell, S. (2003). *The study skills handbook* (2nd ed.). Basingstoke: Palgrave.

## The structure of reports

As stated, there is no one right way to write a report – it depends on your subject and on the purpose of and audience for the report. What we can say with confidence is that reports are always divided (and often subdivided) into several headed sections (and sub-sections). Here are some common sections that often appear in reports:

- An **abstract** (also called **executive summary**) that very briefly summarises the whole report (and which should therefore be written last).
- An **introduction** that describes the purpose of the report, explains why it is necessary and/or useful, and sets out its precise aims and objectives.

- A **literature review** that describes current research and thinking on the problem or issue. (This section is often incorporated into the introduction.)
- A **methods** (or **methodology**) section that describes and justifies the methods used to collect data.
- A **results** (also called **findings**) section that simply presents the results of the research (so it may consist mainly of tables, charts, diagrams etc.)
- A **discussion** (sometimes called **analysis** or **interpretation**) that analyses the results. This is often the most important section of a report.

*These four sections are normally used only in reports about **primary** (i.e. your own) **research**, for example an experiment, survey or case study.*

*If your report is based entirely on reading, you will probably replace these four with topic headings.*

- A **conclusion** that summarises the report, often revisiting the aims and objectives.
- **Recommendations**, where the writer uses the results and conclusions of the report to make practical suggestions about the problem or issue being discussed.
- A **bibliography** (or **reference list**).
- **Appendices** (Appendix 1, Appendix 2, etc.) where data (e.g. in tables) to which the report refers is 'stored'.

Because a report contains a number of different headed sections and sub-sections, it also needs a **Table of Contents** (ToC). The following extract from a report's ToC shows one common way in which the sections in a report can be organised:

4	Results	7
4.1	Initial observation	7
4.2	Second observation	8
4.3	Teacher interviews	10
	4.3.1 Teacher A	10

## The structure of essays

An essay does not need a Table of Contents, because it should normally be a piece of **continuous, flowing, paragraphed text, uninterrupted by headings**. An essay consists of:

- An **introduction** that contextualises (gives some background information about) the issue and that 'signposts' what the essay is going to cover.
- The **body** of the essay, divided into paragraphs that each deal with a different aspect of the issue. Most of the paragraphs in the body of an essay should be linked – one idea should 'flow' into another.
- A **conclusion** that summarises the main points made in the essay.
- A **bibliography** (or **reference list**).

For more resources on essay writing, visit: [www.port.ac.uk/ask](http://www.port.ac.uk/ask)