Some key features of academic reports

Please note! This handout describes and models *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.

Reports, along with essays, are one of the most common types of written assignment on university courses. (For more on the differences between reports and essays please see the handout *Reports and essays: key differences*.)

There is no absolutely right way to structure a report – the structure depends on the purpose. In general, however, *academic* reports feature *some* of the following sections:

1 Title page

2 Author declaration

This is a simple form, usually available from your department or faculty office, which you have to sign and include with any report (or indeed essay) written for your course. It confirms formally that the assignment submitted is entirely your own work.

3 Abstract (sometimes called **Executive Summary**)

An abstract is a *short* **(often around 150 words in length) summary of the whole report**. It should therefore be written last. Unlike a conclusion, the abstract needs to include a brief overview of *all* the stages of the report, not just the results. (One purpose of an abstract is to give just enough information to enable a prospective reader to judge whether they need to read the full report.)

Hint: if you are new to writing abstracts, one approach is to write, in order, one or two sentences to represent each of the sections of your report. Have a look at abstracts or executive summaries in reports in the Library or on the Internet to get an idea of the style in which they are generally written.

4 Acknowledgements

This is a separate page acknowledging the support of those people who have contributed to the assignment. **An acknowledgements page is normally necessary only in major reports**.

5 Table of Contents (ToC)

This should list clearly all the sections and subsections of your report and the page numbers where each of those sections begins. A common (but not compulsory) way to organise reports is to use hierarchically numbered headings. For example:

After the Table of Contents comes a separate list of any tables, charts or diagrams that you have included in the report. Tables should be called 'Table 1 [plus the title]', 'Table 2' etc. Charts or diagrams should be called 'Figure 1 [plus the title]', 'Figure 2' etc. Include in this separate list the page number of each table or chart.

6 Introduction

In the introduction you should describe the purpose (aim) of the report and explain why it is necessary and/or useful. Depending on the purpose of the report, you might break down the overall aim into specific objectives. Additionally, you might define key terms (words) that you use in the report, so that your reader is quite clear what you mean when you use those terms.

> **Note**: the following four sections (7–10) are normally used only in reports about **primary** (i.e. your own) **research**, for example an experiment, survey or observation.
>
> If your report is based entirely on reading, you will probably replace these four sections with a number of topic headings of your own choice.

7 Literature review

In this section you **describe previous and current thinking and research on the topic**. In other words you report, usually by summarising, what others have written about the topic. Because you are reporting others' work, your literature review will probably contain **many in-text citations** to the books and articles ('literature') you have read.

In more scientific research, it is common to end the literature review with one or more hypotheses for your own research.

Note: in many reports, the literature review is incorporated into the introduction, and it may have a simpler title, such as 'Background'.

8 Method(s) (sometimes called **Methodology** or **Research design**)

These three terms – 'method', 'methodology' and 'research design' – actually have slightly different meanings; consult a research methods text for more information. This section, however, is where you tell the reader ***how*** **you collected the data** used in the report (i.e. your methods). You might, for example, describe, step-by-step, an experiment you carried out or describe a situation you observed. This description normally needs to be quite detailed.

It is normally necessary also to explain ***why*** **you collected the data in that way** (i.e. to *justify* your methods). Normally, this justification also needs to be quite detailed. You might include some in-text references to research methods literature to help explain your choice of method(s).

9 Results (sometimes called **Findings**)

Here you **simply present the results of your research** – 'what you found out'. There should be no discussion or analysis of those results. The 'Results' section often includes tables or charts.

If you have created one or more hypotheses for your report, you should state in this section whether you can accept or reject them.

10 Discussion of results (sometimes called **Analysis** or **Interpretation**)

This is often the most important part of a report, because it shows what you think about your results. In the discussion you should **comment on your results**. This can include:

- Describing and suggesting reasons for any patterns in the results, possibly including anomalies (results that don't 'fit in with' the rest).
- Explaining what you found (perhaps with reference to theory).
- Commenting on how much your findings agree or disagree with the literature.
- Considering the accuracy and reliability of your results (and how the methods you used might have affected that accuracy).
- Considering the implications of your results – what they might mean for your practice, for example.
- Discussing what further research in this area might be useful in future.

11 Conclusions

In the conclusions you **summarise the key findings of your report**. (Imagine you have to reduce everything you found out down to just five or six sentences.) **No new information should be included**. It can be helpful to revisit the aim(s) and objectives from your introduction, and perhaps to comment also on how well those aims and objectives have been met.

12 Recommendations

Not all reports include recommendations. But if your report is on a work-related issue or case study, and especially if the issue concerns problem-solving or improving practice, it may well be appropriate to make recommendations. These are **suggestions for future action** on the issue in the report. Usually, these will be suggestions, **arising from your research**, which you think will improve a situation.

13 References (also termed **Reference list** or **Bibliography**)

This is a list, written in a very particular style, of the books and articles you read for and used in the report. (Strictly speaking a **bibliography** includes all sources you have used whereas a **reference list** contains only sources you have actually cited in your text.)

14 Appendices

Appendices are extra sections at the very back of a report in which supplementary information is 'stored'. This could be tables of data, copies of observation forms or notes, extracts (not photocopies) from large documents (for example, Parliamentary Enquiries) to which you have referred, or any other essential information which you have mentioned in your report and to which you would like your reader to be able to refer. Put each source in a separate Appendix (Appendix A [or 1], Appendix B [or 2] and so on.)