A Useful Guide to Report Writing

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Pansophix

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Report Writing

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You can download an MS Word toolkit from here.

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Introduction

Very few of us are formally taught the skills of writing for business. Despite that we are usually expected to know how to communicate effectively in writing in a business style.

For those people who were educated in the halcyon days when schools taught only 'creative writing' many of us missed out on learning the basic rules and structure of our language. This of course means that it is difficult to know how to set out and argue a clear and unambiguous case in a style that reflects the needs of the readers.

I know because I was thrown in at the deep end when joining a management consultancy as their learning and development consultant. I was sent out to review a client's training needs by talking to the managers and the staff and then write a report of my findings and subsequent recommendations.

I had never written anything like this before. I knew there was some sort of structure but for what purpose? I was nervous because like many people I thought reports were difficult, time consuming and packed with complicated and seldom used words. No wonder we all avoided them.

So like many new report writers I found a template with report headings on the internet and started writing. Wrong! Despite the title of this guide the writing part is the last part of the process. Hemingway when interviewed about his novels said, "Writing is long periods of planning and short periods of writing." And so it is with report writing. The more you think and plan at the front end the easier the writing part will be. I hope that through this Useful Guide you will find you will be able to put together a report which will inform, evaluate and advise your readers accurately, briefly and clearly in the shortest possible time.

Every written communication involves the writer, the reader and the message itself.

In order for the message to be understood the writer must clarify his or her ideas, order the information, select the right words and present it in a way which is understandable.

The reader's role is to read, to check understanding, to provide feedback and to act on the results.

As a result it should be clear that the most important person in this relationship is the reader. The message must be geared to the needs of the reader(s).

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There are five stages for writing a report which we will examine in more depth over the next few pages. These are ...

- Understanding the brief

- Researching information

- Organising the information

- Compose the rough draft

- Preparing the final report

So no formal writing until we get to chapter four.

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1 Understanding the Brief

Before you start to prepare your report you need to know the **purpose** of the report. Too often people start off writing without being completely clear whom the audience is and why the report has been commissioned.

So start by asking yourself some questions …

- Why am I writing this report?
- What do I want to achieve?
- Who will read this?
- What does my reader want to know?
- How formal should it be?
- How will this be used?
- By when is it needed?

Once you have answered these questions, you should be clear about the kind of document you need and how formal it needs to be. Bring your written answers together now to create your purpose and your objectives.

For example you might write:

The purpose of this report is to …

- *Examine the current uptake of our products and the return on the marketing investment.*
- *Identify key areas for improving how we approach our customers.*
- *Identify the cost implications of improving the current process.*

Keep this beside you so you can continue to remind yourself what you want the report to achieve and to save yourself going off at a tangent. When you research your content you can continue to ask yourself questions against the stated purpose. Questions like, 'Is this important?' 'Will my readers understand this?'

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2 Researching information

Sometimes this part is made easy for you. Often reports are commissioned by someone who has been given a pile of information and wants it presented in a coherent way. This then requires you to put it into piles and move on to the next chapter where you start to organise the information.

This can also be the slowest stage. You need to set yourself goals and deadlines and make a plan around how to go about finding all the information you need.

If you haven't got every detail you will need to carry out research. Sometimes described as desk research you will need to consult records and look up information in files and notes. In market research terms it is considered a secondary way of finding out information. For example if you are preparing a report on the impact of a management development programme on the company you will need access to all the evaluation feedback from tutors and participants. A report on absenteeism within the organisation will require copies of all the records and notes made from each staff member's personnel file.

You may also need to talk to people to elicit their thoughts, ideas for information. This then is Primary research. These can be people inside your organisation and you may have to contact other organisations especially if, for example, you wanted to demonstrate a benchmark or to establish if your business was faring better or worse than others in the same size or sector as your own.

You may do this through structured questionnaires or surveys, through tests or simply observation. Whatever method you use you will need to add a description of how you researched the information in a section of the report. The actual materials, if relevant, would be presented as an annex or appendix and your findings described in the body of the report.

So once your research is completed and you have masses of information in the form of files, notes, survey results and questionnaires you are ready to take the next step.

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3 Organising your information

The first step is to sort your findings. Group your findings and list them under headings appropriate to your requirements. There may be for and against comments, different topics areas, business sectors, geographical areas, etc. - whatever is appropriate. In an exercise on writing a report for a canteen about the complaints they have received, you might create headings such as health, safety, variety, service, etc.

A useful way to do this is to create a mindmap. This concept was created by Tony Buzan, the author of a number of books on the subject.   The idea is that your brain doesn't work well with long linear lists. A mind map, or spider diagram, works with your brain to capture thoughts and ideas without the need (at this stage) to order them. If you are familiar with right and left brain theory, this will make complete sense to you. The theory is that the right side of the brain handles creativity and ideas and the left side is logical and analytical. If you try to think of new ideas and thoughts, and at the same time order and structure them, the two 'sides' are competing and neither side achieves its goal.

Mind mapping will allow you to collect and sort all your ideas and then you can decide what is relevant, that is, helps your argument and what is not so important or even necessary.   Rejecting weak or unsupportive findings is as important as maintaining the important points. A mind map is a powerful graphic technique that can access the potential of the brain. It works with the critical skills of word, number, logic, rhythm, colour and special awareness. These are all areas which are now described as the eight intelligences. (Howard Gardner)

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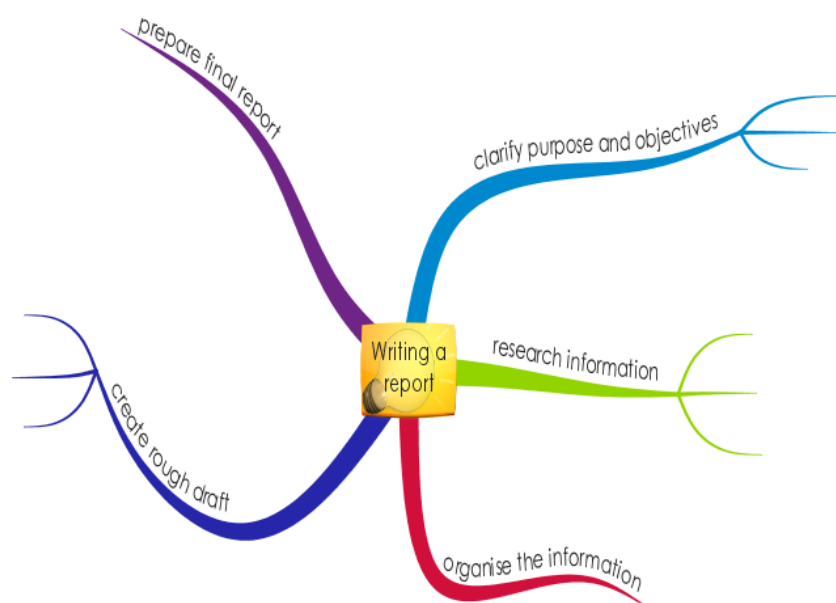
Capturing your findings on a visual map allows your brain to make links. By using a sheet of A4 or A3 paper in landscape mode and some coloured pens (the brain likes colour) you will be able to make your own mind map. Choose three to six key areas or headings and add your findings to the most appropriate headings. If you jot reminder words of the findings on 'post its'™ it allows you to move them around if you change your mind later. As you build up your map you will see the linkages, and the arguments, more clearly.

Mind maps are worth working on to find the method best suited to you for as well as for ordering reports a mind map can be used in a number of ways for …

- Note taking
- Recall
- Creativity
- Problem solving
- Planning
- Presentations.

Using Visuals to illustrate your findings.

This is a good time to think about ways you might enhance your report with interesting visuals and graphs. There is a quote often used which says 'a picture paints a thousand words' which means, I think, that people understand more if they get a fresh perspective of the presentation through another medium. Some people can understand more complex information when presented numerically, others prefer pictures in the form of graphs, charts or even mind maps.

If the information you are presenting in a report is complex it is often more effective to display it in visual form. This gives greater impact and also makes it easier for your readers to refer to for details of your research.

Visuals may be included in the body of the report but are frequently better set out in an appendix at the end.

In preparing visuals they need to be …

- Simple without being over-crowded with data
- Large enough for clear presentation of the required information
- Referred to in the body of the report even if placed in an appendix
- Complement, not replace, the text of the report
- Be clearly and accurately labeled.

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There are a variety of visuals you can use in a report ...

- **Bar Graphs** – for comparisons
- **Pie Graphs** – for showing parts of the whole
- **Line Graphs** – for giving specific information
- **Tables** – for a compact comparison of statistics
- **Charts** – for setting out the relationship between different factors

If you are creating your report in MS Word then MS Excel can produce your visuals very simply and they can be imported in the Word document.

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4 Compose your rough draft

Having decided what your main points are, and listed them, you can start to arrange your findings in a logical order. Since most reports present an argument for one view or another, the order should include the most important points first since they will be the best remembered.

In order to help your readers take in your message you will need to structure the content in a logical and clear way. To do this you will need a sequence of headings and sub-headings which act as signposts to help your readers find the information they need.

A good structure will also make it easier to choose the right words to express your thoughts and ideas as you start writing.

The main headings and sub-headings will give your readers an overview of your plan. Good headings will tell your readers about the subject in each section.

Disappointing as it may be, you should remember many readers may not want to read the whole report. They will only want to read the parts that are relevant to them. A well structured report will help them to find information quickly and allow them to concentrate on only one aspect at a time.

Having a good structure will help you to decide where to put each fact or idea. It will help you to think clearly. It also allows you to start writing at any point, not necessarily from the beginning. If different people are contributing to your report they will know, from the structure, what part they must cover without waiting for you to finish your part.

Make sure the structure is complete. It must cover all the facts and the ideas. Do not have headings like 'general' or 'other notes' these will usually show you the structure is not meeting the report's needs.

So your headings need to be helpful and clear – they must tell the readers about the information in each section. One word headings are often vague and misleading so don't be afraid of using headings that are eight or nine words long. These will help you to be more certain of what to put in each section and will help your readers find the details they need.

Do not have too much material in each section or too many headings. Your readers will only be able to cope with a maximum of six key points. The more formal the report the more likely you are to use sub headings and numbering.

A formal report should always be written in the third person. Below you can see a typical structure. It demonstrates that there are two things going on at the

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same time. On the left the content is where we describe the situation, the implications of the situation, the possibilities for improving, changing, modifying the situation and finally your recommendations. On the right hand side you need to make sure your report is really easy to follow and to understand so we have reminders that there must be a beginning, a middle and an end.

Structuring the report

For Read Out Loud Readers: The following table has 2 columns. The left hand column has 4 rows. In the right hand column the rows have been merged into one row.

Situation	**Beginning**
Implications	**Middle**
Possibilities	
Recommendations	**End**

For Read Out loud Readers: The table has finished.

Report Headings

Reports can contain the following headings though not all these are needed in all reports. For example a glossary of terms may help if the readers are unfamiliar with terms used, but not otherwise. Two and three page reports may not require title or content pages.   Not all reports require recommendations and less formal reports do not need terms of reference which can be covered in the introduction or background.

Your organisation may have its own template of headings into which you can place your report but, if not, you can select from the following the most appropriate for your audience. Remember the purpose is to make your report understandable and easily accessible to all who read it.

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Title Page

This will include the title of the report, who has written it and the date it was written/submitted.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to the people who have contributed to the report.

Contents page

As in a book, this lists the headings in the report, together with the page numbers showing where the particular section, illustration etc. can be located. There is no need to include a contents page with a short two three page report.

Executive Summary

This is a most important part of many reports and may well be the only section that some readers read in detail. It should be carefully written and should contain a complete overview of the message in the report, with a clear summary of your recommendations. Although this is where it sits in the report structure the summary should not be written until the end and all your findings, conclusions and recommendations have been made.

Terms of reference

This section sets the scene for your report. It should define the scope and limitations of the investigation and the purpose of the report. It should say whom the report is for, any constraints (for example your deadline, permitted length) - in other words, your aims and objectives - the overall purpose of your report and, more specifically, what you want to achieve.

Methodology

This section outlines how you carried out your investigation. How you gathered the information, and from where it was gathered. If you used a survey, how the survey was carried out, how you determined the target group, how many people were surveyed, how they were surveyed - for example, interviews or online questionnaire?

Introduction/background

This will help to tune-in your readers in to the background of your report. It is not another name for a summary and should not be confused with this. Introduction and Background can be two separate sections or combined.

Background detail could include details of the topic you are writing about.

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You could take the opportunity to expand on your Terms of Reference within the Introduction, give more detail as to the background of the report - but remember to keep it relevant, factual and brief.

I would recommend you write your Findings and Conclusions (see below) before your Introduction. Your Introduction will then fall more easily into place.

Findings/analysis

Start your report here using the notes from your research. This is the main body of the report, where you develop your ideas. Make sure that it is well structured, with clear headings, and that your readers can find information easily. Use paragraphs within each section to cover one aspect of the subject at a time. Include any graphs or other visual material in this section if this will help your readers. The nature of this section will depend on the brief and scope of the report. The findings should deal with the main topics being discussed - there should be a logical sequence, moving from the descriptive to the analytical. It should contain sufficient information to justify the conclusions and recommendations which follow. Selection of appropriate information is crucial here. If information is important to help understanding, then it should be included; irrelevant information should be omitted.

Conclusions

These are drawn from the analysis in the previous section and should be clear, concise and neutral. They are presented as facts. The conclusion section allows you to draw logical judgments from the data so that readers can decide what they want to do.

Make sure you do not draw a conclusion which is not supported by the findings.

At this stage in the report, no new information can be included and the conclusions should also link back to the Terms of Reference if you have them in your report. The conclusions should cover what you have deduced about the situation and whether or not you have been asked to make recommendations. The conclusions should make it very clear that something needs to be done.

Recommendations

Make sure that you highlight any actions that need to follow on from your work. Your readers will want to know what they should do as a result of reading your report and will not want to dig for the information. Make the actions specific - recommendations such as, "It is recommended that some changes should be made" are not helpful, merely irritating.

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As with the Conclusion, Recommendations should be clearly derived from the main body of the report and again, no new information should be included.

References

References are items referred to in the report. The Bibliography contains additional material not specifically referred to, but which readers may want to follow up.   This is normally only included in very formal reports such as academic papers.

Appendices

Use these to provide any more detailed information which your readers may need for reference - but do not include key data which your readers really need in the main body of the report.   You may wish to include a sample of any questionnaire(s) you used. Appendices must be relevant and should be numbered so they can be referred to in the main body.

Glossary of terms

Provide a glossary if you think it will help your readers but do not use one as an excuse to include jargon in the report that your readers may not understand.

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5 Putting your report together

So, at last, the writing begins.

You need to use a standard layout format so that information is easy to follow and important considerations are not omitted. Organise your points so that information is set out in the order of importance – main points first and present your findings factually and objectively. This helps you to make sure you justify your statements with facts and figures.

Do not reveal your opinion at this stage of the report.

In all your communications check that you are writing as you talk. This means using the language of everyday conversations rather than a pile of 'book words' kept especially for report writing.

For example, there is no need to write 'purchase' in a report when you would normally say 'buy'. Choose words that are clear and easy for the reader to understand.

Pompous writing so often distances your reader from the message. For example, 'In the interim period' or 'adopted measures to…' are much more difficult to read than 'now' or 'took steps to…'.

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6 Preparing your final draft

When we present neat high-quality and well written documents, letters, reports and proposals, we send a message to the readers that our organisation has a high self-image and cares about delivering a quality customer service.

Like body language signals which tell us how people are feeling, our written communications pass on messages as well. When we find errors in other people's writing, we tend to focus on those rather than the message. If we are to write effectively we must check carefully so that all errors are eliminated.

Editing your writing should always come after you have written your document not during it. There is a lot of evidence which shows that different parts of your brain work on different requirements. For example, when writing your report you are using your creative side - free thoughts and ideas flowing on to the page. Your editing brain is logical and wants to seek out mistakes, typos, grammar errors, spelling etc. Neither side works effectively if they try to work together.

Proof reading is easier with a fresh eye. If possible you should set your report aside for a day or two before checking it. This helps to separate the two key tasks of logical activity using the left brain and your creative flow performed by the right brain.

Check the sentence structure. 18 to 24 words in a sentence are more than enough. Shorter sentences are easier to read. You can test the length by reading it aloud. If you need to draw breath before the end it's too long. Sentences are used most effectively when there is one main point per sentence rather than two or three. Long sentences take longer to digest for the average reader.

Avoid redundancy and repetition and leave out unnecessary words. For example there is no need for 'planning' to be accompanied by 'forward' or 'proactive' such as 'proactive, forward planning'. Be aware of 'past' experience or 'other' alternatives. Are there any other kind? And finally remember there are in the English language a number of words which sound the same but are spelt differently and mean different things.

Check you have short paragraphs to give visual as well as mental breaks to the reader. You should have one key point per paragraph and each paragraph should be made up of at least two sentences.

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Check out word usage mistakes. There are a number of commonly confused words which make a nonsense of your report if you get it wrong. Try the test on page 23 and see how well you do.

Check for grammar, spelling, and punctuation. If the same things come up regularly make a list of the correct words to keep by you when you are checking. Make sure your punctuation helps the reader to make sense of your writing.

What Not to Write is the perfect book to keep beside you when you are writing any business documents.

Check for typing errors. A useful technique is to read each sentence from right to left. This allows the brain to concentrate on the shape and letters not on the content and what it expects to see. Don't just rely on spellchecker however effective it seems. This little poem should remind you of the pitfalls!

I have spelling checker. It came with my PC.

It plainly marks four my revue mistakes I cannot sea

I've run this poem threw it. I'm sure your pleased to no

Its letter perfect in it's weigh. My checker told me sew

However, if you are using MS Word, Microsoft's grammar checker is a very useful tool to help with editing your document. When you click on **Grammar and Spelling checker** and then on **options** you can select for grammar checks, punctuations, spelling and for clichés. Most importantly it gives you statistics on your document's readability. At the end of checking your document a box opens up with your readability statistics.

This is what you need to be aiming for.

Sentences per paragraph. Helps you to make sure you are using a paragraph per topic. The average in normal writing for clarity is 3 to 4 sentences per paragraph.

Words per sentence. You should be aiming for an average of 14 words per sentence.

Characters per word. Helps you to check out if you are using too many long words when there are smaller ones available.

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Passive sentences. Aim for 10% or less. The active voice can be created by moving the subject to the beginning of the sentence. This is more difficult in a very formal report written in the third person.

Flesch Reading Ease is based on 100- point scale. Aim for 60% or more to ensure readability.

Flesch-Kincaid Grade level is an American grading system. Lower is better so aim for grade 9 or less so your reader does not need to struggle to understand.

A quick check of this page produced the following report

Sentences per paragraph	4.2
Words per sentence	12.9
Characters	4.7
Passive voice	0%
Reading Ease	63.7
Grade level	7.5

The Flesch Reading ease was created in the 1940s by Rudolph Flesch a supporter of plain English. Based on the number of syllables and words in sentences you can see how easy your writing is to the average reader. The higher the score the easier your writing is to read. The Flesch-Kincaid grade level equates to the American school reading system and here the lower number is better. Check out paragraphs in your favourite newspapers to see the level the writing is pitched to. For example the Economist magazine writes to a grade 9 reader.

Check that your conclusions and recommendations are logical and practicable. Are you using headings, indenting and numbering to help your readers follow complex material? You must make sure all necessary headings have been included. Make sure your chosen format is appropriate i.e. short report or formal report; your style and register are appropriate and you have presented the information objectively.

Assuming you have met your deadline the very best approach is to ask a colleague or friend to proof read for you and you can return the favour when they need help.

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Here is a very useful checklist to use for every report you write. This checklist is in the downloadable toolkit.

Purpose	
Are you absolutely clear about the purpose of your report?	
Have you identified and taken into account, your readers' needs and preferences?	
Information	
Does all the information you have included fully relate to the purpose of your report?	
Have you included all your main points?	
Is each of your main points supported by clear evidence?	
Are your arguments followed through to a clear conclusion?	
Is your report logical/easy to follow?	
Accuracy	
Have you used your spell checker to eliminate spelling mistakes?	
Have you checked, and double checked, all your figures?	
Have you checked all your references?	
Are all your sources of information listed in the *References* section?	
Have you avoided using abbreviations? If not have you explained the abbreviations?	
Images	
Are all the images and diagrams clear and fully explained?	
Have you given all the images alternative text to help visually impaired readers who use Read Out Loud Readers?	
Language	
Is the Flesch Reading Ease score greater than 60%?	
Is the Flesch-Kincaid Grade level below 9?	
Have you ensured that your report is clear, direct and easy to read?	
Have you asked someone else to read your report and explain it back to you?	
Have you used the appropriate tone to achieve your purpose?	
Have you deleted unnecessary words and phrases?	
Have you checked your grammar and punctuation?	
Have you removed any repetition?	
Presentation and Format	
Is your Executive Summary at the front and as short as possible?	
Can the most important items be easily found?	
Are all your headings and numbering clear and consistent?	
Has your report been proof read?	

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Some dangers for the unwary writer

One of the biggest problems with reports is the writers thinking they sound more important or formal if they use big words instead of everyday language.

Nothing can be further from the truth.

Why should a report be harder to read, and consequently, to understand because it is labelled a report. Remind yourself whom you are writing for and how much you want your report to be read, understood and be persuasive. The following exercise has taken some of these overdone statements or over long words found in some very poor reports. Can you suggest some simpler ways of expressing yourself? My suggestions are here.

- A significantly higher level of production
- Adjacent to
- Adopted measures to
- Approximately
- For reasons of a practical nature
- In such a fashion as to ensure
- In the event that
- In the interim period
- In the not too distant future
- In the present situation
- In the work situation
- In view of the fact that
- Inform
- Manpower resources
- Not by any means unknown
- Not without considerable trouble
- Prior to
- Remuneration
- Taking into consideration
- The ambient humidity conditions
- The expensive nature of the product
- The least possible degree of
- An increase in pressure became apparent
- The position in regard to the availability
- Will find it advisable

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Use of excessive words

Another area to avoid is the use of excessive words in your report. Part of your editing process should be to remove those words. For example is there anything other than a 'terrible disaster'; an 'armed gunman'; 'multiple choice', 'forward planning'? This often happens because you want to make your points too well. Question every word and remove repetitions and excessive emphasis.

Management Speak

Then there is the dreaded 'management speak'. What do we really mean by forward planning, or better, proactive, forward planning which was in an appraisal document sent to me by a client! Then there is 'cutting edge', 'grassroots level', blue sky thinking' 'high visibility' and 'fundamentally flawed'. I won't go on.   But do let's stop 'engaging' with people and start talking, or communicating or consulting with them instead?

Avoid Clichés

Clichés are lazy shorthand. Using others' well used expressions in your report reduces trust in what you have to say. Expressions like 'at the end of the day', 'thinking outside the box', 'tip of the iceberg', 'in this day and age' and 'to all intents and purposes' are all meaningless and turn your carefully crafted report into a woolly and often impenetrable diatribe. Mixed metaphors particularly when written in management speak will lose your audience too. I heard a presentation recently where the speaker achieved that in one completely meaningless sentence. He said "we must step up to the plate and avoid an own goal"

Here you have clichés and a mixed metaphor in the same breath. Step up to the plate I believe refers to a position in a baseball game and own goals I think to football or rather soccer. Please don't let this happen to your report.

As you can see our wonderful language can be challenging. The most difficult is probably the fact we have a huge number of words which sound the same but mean different things. Words such as complimentary and complementary which are pronounced in exactly the same way can lead to misunderstandings if the wrong word is selected in your report.

Try out the quiz on the next page to see if you know the meanings of the following pairs of words. Some you need to describe. Others are the difference between nouns and verbs. You can see my answers by clicking here.

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Commonly confused words —what's the difference?

Advice
Advise

Affect
Effect

All ready
Already

Amount
Number

Around
Round

Ascent
Assent

Beside
Besides

Can
May

Cite
Site

Comprehensible
Comprehensive

Complementary
Complimentary

Continual
Continuous

Council
Counsel

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Currently
Presently

Defuse
Diffuse

Different from
Different to

Discreet
Discrete

Disinterested
Uninterested

Fewer
Less

Formally
Formerly

Its
It's

Loose
Lose

Might have
Might of

Personal
Personnel

Principal
Principle

Stationary
Stationery

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Who's
Whose

Their
There
They're

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7 Report Writing Exercise

Here is a report writing exercise so you can try out your report writing skills. When you have finished your report you can download my example report and compare my report with yours.

The catering manager of Barchester Manufacturing, John Smith, introduced a suggestion box in the factory canteen four months ago.   The staff used it to make a number of complaints about the service and the conditions.

John is concerned at the number and type of complaints and has asked for some help.

You are to analyse the complaints and write a short report, with recommendations, for the Canteen Committee.

The Canteen Committee is made up of the Catering Manager, the Food Purchasing Supervisor, one of the cooks, two users of the canteen and the personal assistant to the Operations Director.

You should tackle it by first thinking about the following questions …

- What is the objective of my report?
- Who are my readers?
- What do my readers already know about the subject?
- Are there any barriers which prevent others from understanding or accepting the report?
- Why are they reading the report?
- When and where will the report be read?

Feel free to use your imagination in creating a background for the organisation.

The findings from the suggestion box are summarized here …

1.   Hardly any choice.
2.   Only ever one vegetarian alternative.
3.   Custard is too thick.
4.   The tables are unsteady.
5.   My knife was not clean.
6.   I could not see what I was eating.
7.   There are too many delays.
8.   There is not enough room to queue properly.
9.   The chairs are too high.
10. Why not serve some European dishes?

11. Tea is too weak.

12. The towels in the lavatory are dirty.

13. Not enough staff to get your food quickly.

14. Chips are not cooked through.

15. Canteen is too crowded at peak times.

16. There are still four tables with benches rather than chairs.

17. Make the meals more varied.

18. Coffee tastes as if it has been kept hot all day.

19. Must we always have fish on Friday?

20. Vegetables are kept warm and get soggy.

21. The ice cream is too hard.

22. The curtains in the canteen are too dirty.

23. You have to wait too long to be served.

24. I found a beetle in my soup.

25. Food is often cold for latecomers.

26. The coffee is burnt.

27. Why can't we have salads in the winter?

28. Baked potatoes taste as if they are continually reheated.

29. Can we have a choice of fresh fruit instead of dessert?

30. The tablecloths are dirty.

31. you cannot move without knocking into people.

32. There is never enough of the popular dishes for those coming in later.

33. When will we have a choice of healthy options?

34. Salt cellars don't work.

35. We are always running out of clean cutlery.

You will need to identify topic areas in order to present your findings in a coherent and easy to understand way.

I propose the following. You may well think of others …

- Food quality
- Food choice
- Hygiene
- Service

Once the findings are arranged you can start to prepare the report. I suggest the following structure and sequence for of this particular report …

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- Title page
- Introduction/background
- Findings
- Conclusions
- Recommendations
- Appendix   (summary list of all the complaints received)

Your report should be no more than 1500 words– excluding the appendix.

When you have finished you can download my example report from here.

In summary

Your report is finished and you have checked everything on your checklist and got it off your desk and in front of the decision makers in your organisation. So now it's time to relax and wait for the praise!

Remember the process I have outlined here is a standard one which will become easier and quicker to follow with every report you write. On my 'one day' report writing workshops I give my students some information to work on to create and write a report in pairs. They are always delighted and surprised to find how easy it is once they get started.

I hope you found this Useful Guide useful and good luck with your next report.

Charlotte Mannion - November 2011

Feedback

As we are always trying to improve our Useful Guides we would appreciate any feedback you can give us on **A Useful Guide to Report Writing.** Please click on the link below to access our online feedback form ...

http://www.pansophix.com/useful-guide-feedback.html

If we use your feedback to improve **A Useful Guide to Report Writing** we will email you a copy of the updated version.

You can access lots of free tips and tools at 247freetips.com.

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About the Author

Charlotte Mannion is the founder and a director of Quicklearn a communications consultancy based in Wiltshire. Charlotte works as a coach and facilitator helping people to communicate better in both their writing and verbal communications. She is also the author of …

- A Useful Guide to Mentoring
- Mentoring Essentials
- A Useful Guide to Public Speaking
- How to Give a Perfect Wedding Speech

Charlotte designs and delivers workshops with the emphasis on 'learning by doing' using accelerated learning and brain friendly techniques. Above all she believes in making learning both memorable and fun.

Charlotte is married with three grown up children. She is a member of Rotary and enjoys working with others to raise money for charitable causes. Charlotte is an enthusiastic public speaker and the artistic director of the Ridgeway Theatre Company where she keeps her hand in directing productions of different and unusual plays. She loves walking in the country and food (if someone else is cooking!)

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Appendix 1

Glossary of grammatical terms

Acronym - A word formed from the initial letters of other words. For example, KISS – 'keep it short and simple'.

Adjective - An adjective is a word that describes a noun. For example, the **red** car is **reliable** and **economical.**

Adverb – A word that qualified a verb – it 'adds' to the verb. For example, it tells how, where or when action is taking place. For example, I will drive **slowly**.

Alliteration - Repetition of a letter or sound for effect. For example, **P**eter **P**iper **p**icked a **p**inch of **p**ickled **p**epper.

Antonym - A word that has the opposite meaning to another. For example: Large – small, fast – slow, efficient – inefficient.

Article - The 'article' (or determiner) is 'a', 'an', or 'the'. These simple words tell the reader whether you are talking about one of (potentially) many items or a specific one.

Bibliography - A list of books that have been used.

Clause - A group of works that contain both a subject and a verb and make sense by themselves.

Conjunction - A word that links two clauses together. For example, Abdul likes his new car, **however,** I prefer mine **because** it is more luxurious.

Contraction - A contraction is a pair of words that have been shortened and run together. An apostrophe indicates where letters are missing. For example, didn't for did not.

Imperative - The imperative is a form of the verb, which gives an order or instruction.

Inverted commas - Speech marks; put around speech and quotations.

Jargon - Words or expressions used by a particular group of people.

Metaphor - An implied comparison of two things. For example, this car **flies.**

Noun - The noun is the name of a person or thing.

Noun, abstract - A word that denotes a quality or state (something that you cannot see or touch). For example, **speed.**

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Noun, collective - A singular word, which refers to a group of people or things. For example, a **fleet**.

Noun, common - The name of a thing. For example, a **car.**

Noun, proper - The name of a person or place. It always begins with a capital letter.

Object - A noun or pronoun that follows the verb and is related to the subject.

Onomatopoeia - a word where the sound echoes the meaning. For example, the engine **hummed,** the bird **squawked.**

Paragraph - a paragraph is a group of sentences dealing with the same topic.

Phrase - A group of words not necessarily containing a verb or making sense on its own.

Plagiarism - Using someone else's work as your own.

Plural - refers to more than one item.

Preposition - a preposition tells where a noun is in relation to another. For example, **on** the dashboard. **In** the glove compartment. **Under** the steering wheel

Pronoun - a pronoun takes the place of a noun. For example, **he** likes **his** new car. **It is** a long journey. **My** car broke down and I was late for **our** meeting.

Prose — Written or spoken language without regular rhythm or rhyme.

Plural - refers to more than one item.

Sentence - a sentence is a group of words that makes sense. A sentence should only contain one subject. A sentence should be in the same tense throughout. A sentence should not be longer than 20 words (as a general rule). A sentence starts with a capital letter and ends with a full stop, question mark or exclamation mark.

Simile - A comparison of two things using 'like' or 'as'. For example, driving this car is **like flying.**

Singular - refers to just one item. Can be used with the articles 'a' or 'an' if it is non-specific, or 'the' if it is specific. For example, a car; a journey; the driver.

Summary - A shortened version of a longer piece of writing.

Synonym - A word that can be used to replace another. For example, fast – quick – rapid – speedy – brisk – swift.

Tautology - A statement that is repeated in a different way in the same sentence. For example, the last chapter will be at the end of the book. The people applauded by clapping their hands.

Thesaurus - A book, which will give a selection of synonyms.

Verb - a verb is a word that tells you what the noun is doing. For example, I am **driving** to London. Verbs also tell you when the action takes place – the tense: I will drive; I drove. Sometimes the action takes place over a period of time; then we use the continuous tense: I will be driving.

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Appendix 2

Checklist - five basic stages to writing a report

Understanding the brief

- The purpose of the report
- Its scope
- Whether you are to make recommendations
- Who is going to read it
- The deadline for completion
- What degree of formality is required?

Researching information

- Consulting records
- Talking to the people involved
- Carrying out your own research/observations/tests
- Contacting other organisations.

Consulting records

- Talking to the people involved
- Carrying out your own research/observations/tests
- Contacting other organisations.

Organising the information

- Group your material
- Reject unnecessary data
- Identify the main points
- Arrange the information in a logical order.

Compose the rough draft

- Use standard layout format so that information is easy to follow and important considerations are not omitted
- Present your findings factually and objectively. Your opinion is revealed only in the recommendations
- Justify statements with facts and figures
- Check that your conclusions and recommendations are logical and practicable
- Organise your points so that information is set out in the order of importance – main points first

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- Use headings, indenting and numbering to help your readers follow complex material.

Preparing the final draft

- Your chosen format is appropriate i.e. short report or formal report
- All necessary headings have been included
- Your style and register are appropriate and you have presented the information objectively
- You meet your deadline!

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