



Preparing Effective Reports

A report is a structured document, usually prepared for more than one reader, presenting factual information in a concise format. Reports are usually used for decision making but may be for presenting information.

Consider the following issues when putting a report together:

What is the purpose of the report?

Put together a 'Core Statement'. You should be able to sum up your report in a 7 part sentence (see below). This will form the basis of your report, help you manage others' expectations and will be a touchstone for you to check if you've gone off course whilst writing.

Skeleton	Example of a core statement
1. Type of document	<i>This report,</i>
2. Your readers	<i>for the London Olympics Bid Committee,</i>
3. Verb (active, future tense)	<i>will examine</i>
4. Topic	<i>the potential of attracting the Olympics to London</i>
5. Link phrase	<i>with reference to</i>
6. Number of sections	<i>three main headings,</i>
7. Section headings	<i>accommodation, facilities, transport.</i>

What points do you need to cover? You need to clarify the constituent parts of the issue and may also be required to make recommendations on how to proceed. You should provide some insight into the key points and considerations so that the decision-makers are best placed to come to a conclusion. Point out areas of potential controversy and suggest the likely impact of any anticipated actions. If you are making a recommendation, you should explore a range of solutions before making a persuasive case for your chosen one.

Who is going to read it?

What do they need to know? Not all detail is appropriate for all audiences; consider who you are writing for. Do not bore them with 'irrelevant' information, or prevent them from making a decision because they are missing a crucial piece of background detail.

What do they already know?

What do you need to explain to them?

What affects them?

What interests them?



How will you structure the information?

Title page – include the title of your report, author's name and date of the report.

Contents page – list the contents with page numbers.

Summary – This should be a paragraph describing the content of the report and the main findings. Make this section count – it may be the only part that people read, so ensure it contains your Core Statement.

Introduction – Covers essential background information and defines any key words.

Main Content – This should be divided into logical and clearly marked sections, ideally numbered. Use clear and descriptive headings and numbering. It should contain information on the background, current situation and options available to move forward. The information given should be concise, factual, clear, substantiated and unbiased. If information is missing or unavailable, this should be noted.

Conclusion – One or two sentences summarising the main points of your report. There should be no new information here.

Recommendations – If you have been asked to make recommendations, make your case (based on your evidence) here. Be specific and include deadlines – think SMART goals!

Appendices – This is for supporting information, like photos or technical details, which would take up too much space in the main section, but make sure you only include what is absolutely necessary. Label using letters (eg Appendix A, Appendix B).

What will it look like?

Clear – has a clear purpose, easy to follow and to scan, no jargon

Concise – well edited, not too wordy, no unnecessary appendices

Reliable – information is accurate, with notification of missing information

Professional – Proof read for errors, good use of white space to look inviting. If your company or department has a house style, it should be followed.



Report checklist

	✓
BEFORE I WRITE	
Do I understand the purpose of this document?	
Have I written a Core Statement which reflects the purpose?	
Who are my audience? Have they seen and agreed the Core Statement?	
Do I understand my audience's needs and what they're trying to accomplish, including any 'trade-offs' or compromises they would be willing to make?	
Do I have all the information I need about the issue in question, including a clear idea of any areas of controversy?	
Have I explored all options?	
What are the main points I'm trying to get across? <i>Tip: Sometimes it's easier to write if you prepare the summary first!</i>	
What templates or preferred layouts are in use in my organisation or department?	
ONCE WRITTEN	
Does my report have a clear structure? Check for local templates. <i>Tip: If you don't have a template, you can use the following – Title page, Contents, Summary, Introduction, Content, Conclusion, Appendices.</i>	
Does the document cover the main points?	
Does it include all information that my audience will require, with evidence to back it up?	
Is it concise (avoiding unnecessary repetition of the same information)?	
Have I flagged any omissions of information?	
Have I come to a clear conclusion? Where appropriate, have I made recommendations based on that conclusion?	
Is there any unnecessary information that should be cut out, or detailed information in the main body that would be better incorporated into an appendix?	
Have I used jargon?	
Is the document laid out clearly/does it conform to templates and style guidelines?	
Have I used data or graphics? If so, are they accessible and useful? <i>Tip: Excessive use of data or graphics can hinder rather than help. Also, think about how the report will be distributed – printed (b&w or colour?), onscreen or via screenreaders for the visually impaired?</i>	
Has it been proof read?	