

Course: Study Skills
Instructor: Dr. SELOUGUI. S

Level: Second year L.M.D
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Writing a Report

The main objectives of the lecture are as follows:

- To define what ‘report’ is.
- To differentiate between ‘essays’ and ‘reports’
- To develop an overview of the main elements required to write a report.
- To be able to write a short report.

Introduction

Almost all courses require from students to write smaller projects such as: long essays, dissertation writing, and short reports (Cottrell, 2013). Report writing is a structured and formal method of writing that aims at conveying information or findings in a factual manner. This lesson, therefore, provides information on how to write short reports.

1. What is a report?

Cottrell (2013) defined the concept of ‘report’ as ‘the formal method of communicating the results of a project or research assignment. It may cover a laboratory experiment, survey, questionnaire, and case study’. (p. 357).

It is also defined as: ‘A report is a highly structured document written in a formal style. Normally a report is based on both reading and some form of practical work, such as an investigation, survey, experiment or review of practice in other organisations’ (Skills for Learning, 2018, p.1).

Reports are generally conducted in order to:

- Set out the issue and explain why the activity was undertaken.
- Describe what was done and how it was done.
- Present the findings, conclusions, and any recommendations.

2. The main differences between ‘reports’ and ‘essays’:

Reports	Essays
Originate from outside an educational context: they are typical of writing required for the world of work	Originate in academic settings: they are rarely used anywhere else
Present research data and findings that you have collected yourself	Focus on analysing or evaluating theory, past research by other people, and ideas; they seldom present the findings of new research
Are divided into separate sections	Do not have distinct sections, apart from unheaded paragraphs; they flow as a continuous piece of text
Contain tables, charts, and appendices	Do not include tables or appendices
Are divided into sections, each with a heading	Do not include section headings or numbering
Include descriptions of the methods used	Do not refer to the method used in arriving at conclusions
Include a discussion section that identifies how the research could have been improved, and areas for further research	Are not usually reflective about the process of researching and writing the essay itself
May include recommendations for action	Do not include recommendations

3. Reports: Structure and Content

Title

The title page should have the title of the report, the author’s name, the tutor to whom it is being submitted, date of submission, the author’s department, and any other details required by the assignment such as module/ course titles.

Acknowledgement

List of people the writer wishes to thank for help given. This also includes organisations that help in the completion of report and other related work.

Abstract

Is a brief summary or overview of the report. It should be a document, which can be read independently of the main report. More specifically, the abstract sums up the main aims, the research hypothesis, the methodology, the findings and the conclusions. Additionally, an abstract should be both **brief** and **concise**. It is usually limited to 100 words or more.

List of Contents

A clear, well-formatted list of all the sections and sub-sections of the report. This page lists all the main sections including the appendices and their page numbers.

Tables and Illustrations

All illustrations, tables, or diagrams that have been used by the student need to be included in this section.

Introduction

Briefly discusses what the research is about, **why** is it important or significant? **stating** the proposals or hypotheses briefly: what are the writers going to **show** or **test** through their research?

Body:

This is the main section of the report. There needs to be several sections, with each having a subtitle.

a. Review of the Literature

This forms a separate section. The writer here should avoid describing the content of previous literature. Focusing on what each item being mentioned and how these items can contribute to the line of enquiry, such as its use of new sources, data populations, how it led to a refining of theory, changes in method, or opened up new avenues for enquiry.

will build on previous research.

Example: The literature review

It has been argued (Ayer 2000; Bea 2002) that diet can be affected by the colour of food. For example, Bea found that 15% of participants in a series of six experiments showed strong aversions to certain food colour combinations. People were less likely to eat food if they disliked the colour combination. Dee (2004) found that food colour preferences are affected by age, with green being the least popular food colouring amongst children. However, Evans challenged Dee's results. Evans (2006, 2007) found that children's preferences for colour only applied to certain types of food. For sweet foods, for example, children showed a strong preference for red products, but chose green as frequently as other colour options.

Jay extended this area of research to non-natural food colours. Early indications (Jay 2008a) suggest children are likely to select blue coloured food even though blue foods do not often occur naturally. This research was replicated by Kai (2007). Similar results were also found for adults (Jay 2008b). However, Jay's research included only sugar-based products. As Evans has shown that there are different colour preferences for sweet and savoury produce, Jay and Kai's findings may not hold true across all food products, especially for savoury foods.

Jay's research (2008b) indicated strong adult preferences for sweet food coloured blue; Jay argued this was probably due to its 'novelty value'. The aim of the current research was to see whether adults showed the same preferences for blue food colouring when presented with savoury food options. The research hypotheses were that .. [see page 349] It was assumed that the

b. Methodology

This section details how the writer gained their data and analysed it, so that readers can decide whether the results or the conclusions are reliable. The writing is descriptive, and should list actions in the order undertaken: 'First this was done, then that was done ...'.

Example: Methodology

Participants

The research participants were 32 adult students, all aged over 25. There were equal numbers of men and women.

Materials

Four types of food were prepared (potato salad, chapati, rice, couscous) and each was divided into 4. Four different food dyes were used; three were dyes used in the food trade designed to look like a 'natural' food colour; the fourth dye was pale blue. A quarter of each of the four food types was dyed a different colour so that all foods were available in each colour, to give 16 possible options.

Method

Firstly, participants were told that all of the food was coloured using artificial dyes. Each person was then allowed to choose three items to eat. This meant they could not select one of each colour. A record was kept of the colours selected by each person. The results were then calculated according to food colour preference overall, and preferences by gender.

c. Results

The results section simply presents the data: it does not discuss them. This section should be kept short. It should include only relevant and representative data. Stating whether the results support the research hypotheses or not is also included in this section.

Example: Results

24 of the 32 participants (75%) did not select a blue option. The findings do not support the first hypothesis. However, 7 of the 8 participants who selected a blue option were women, 44% of the total compared with 6.25% of men who selected a blue option compared with 6.25% of men who did not select a blue option. This supports the second research hypothesis.

Discussion

This section makes a **critical analysis** of the data. It draws out **interesting findings** such as:

- The significance of the results and whether these support or differ from previous research
- If relevant, your reasons for why the research hypothesis was not supported.
- Suggestions of how improvements or variants to the research could yield different outcomes or further useful research

Conclusions

Conclusions sum up the research, setting out its significance and its findings. No new information or references are included. The conclusions are also included in the abstract, the introduction, and the discussion. For the research above, the conclusions might include:

- a note that your research findings are not consistent with previous research findings.
- a brief summary of why your results may be different (for instance, adult participants rather than children, and savoury food rather than sweet).

- How your results could be applied elsewhere.

- Future research.

Example: Part of the Discussion section

The research indicated that even when participants were told that all food options were artificially coloured, they still chose savoury food that looked 'natural' rather than food dyed blue. This suggests that adults have a preference for natural colours in savoury food. However, the blue dye was streaky; this might have distorted the results.

- notes of any shortcomings of the research.

Example: Conclusions

The research suggests that adults do not select savoury foods dyed blue, if given the choice of other options of dyed food. The 'novelty effect' of blue products, suggested by previous research, did not hold true for savoury foods. The research suggests that people choose savoury food on a different basis from sweet food. However, this hypothesis would need to be tested further by researching the choices made for sweet and savoury products by a single group of participants (etc.).

Recommendations

The purpose of recommendations is to suggest ways forward. They might propose how to improve current ways of working, or action that needs to be taken. They are numbered. For example, if you were undertaking research for an agency, your recommendations might be:

1. Undertake further research using a larger sample.

References

The reference list should detail all the sources the authors have used in their report.

Appendices

This section is used to include material that the reader might want to refer to but would disrupt the flow of the main report. Appendices are also the place to include any data too bulky to place in the body of the report.

Each appendix is numbered, so that it can be referred to in the report.

4. Presentation and layout:

The report content is divided into headings and subheadings. These headings and subheadings are required in order to help the readers locate the information they need. Generally, these sections and subsections are numbered using a progressive numbering system.

Example:

1. Main section

1.1. Subsection

1.1.1. Subsection

1.1.2. Subsection

