

Australian College of Commerce and Management

Guide to Report Writing

What is a Report

A report conveys information and (mostly) recommendations from a person who has investigated this topic in detail.

A report like this will usually be requested by people who need the information for a specific purpose.

A report like this differs from an essay in that it is designed to provide information which will be acted on, rather than to be read by people interested in the ideas for their own sake. Because of this, it has a different structure and format.

A report written for your College course can be thought of as a simulation. We will imagine that someone wants the report for a practical purpose, although we are really writing the report as an academic exercise for assessment.

In this way the report serves academic and practical purposes. As it also addresses an academic purpose, the report should include references to the theories and ideas studied.

Students completing courses can often choose a report topic that can be produced for their organisation and for assessment on the course.



Step 1 – Understand the Question

It is important to identify what the question is asking, and to identify the important parts. One easy way to do this is to look for the key words in the question. It is a good habit to underline the key words to highlight them.

The first thing to look for is the instruction words eg

- a. **Assess** the role of ...
- b. **Evaluate the**
- c. **Examine** the role of...
- d. **Discuss** how...
- e. **Account for** the...
- f. **Explain why** ...
- g. **Outline** the
- h. **Critically analyse**...

See Appendix 1 for the Glossary of Key words information from '2002 HSC Update Newsletter 2' published by the Board of Studies. The College adopts these definitions when writing questions.

The second thing is then to look for the “content” words in the question. These are where you are told what should be the content of your report.

Some examples follow – where the key content words have been underlined:

Example 1.

Write a short 1 – 2 page report that identifies three new things you have learnt about workplace safety. Also identify at least one change you would make to your organisations OH&S policies or procedures to make them more effective. Ensure you justify your recommendations, and where appropriate show the costs and effort involved to implement them; and how you would measure their success.

Example 2.

Prepare a Report of at least 3 – 4 pages on the ways your organisation (or one of which you have knowledge or experience) could improve team effectiveness.

Identify and discuss at least three improvements that could be made.

Detail how you would go about getting approval and implementing these ideas, and the costs involved.

Lastly Some questions provide specific details on what should be in your report. Ensure that you can tick off each item as covered.

Example:

Your report will be assessed against the following criteria:

- Appropriate research of the issue is demonstrated
- Analysis is undertaken
- Problem solving skills are evident
- Innovative ideas and solutions are identified
- Communication of concepts is clear
- Justification of recommendations

Step 2 – Plan Your Answer

There is lots of work to do before you start writing your report! You need to research and thoroughly understand the topic area.

Do this by making notes about each of the areas.

A good approach to take is identify the key sections and then dot point the key points under that topic.

If you can – wordprocess your planning notes – as then its easier to add more points and to cut and paste and move sections around until you are happy with the plan.

Note – if you are unsure about whether your plan will address the question – simply send your planning notes to your Training Manager and then call them to elaborate – and they would be able to give you feedback at this early stage.

For example if we take Example 1 above we might get the following Planning Notes:

Example 1.

Write a short 1 – 2 page report that identifies three new things you have learnt about workplace safety. Also identify at least one change you would make to your organisations OH&S policies or procedures to make them more effective. Ensure you justify your recommendations, and where appropriate show the costs and effort involved to implement them; and how you would measure their success.



Planning Notes:

new thing learnt no 1 = risk assessment

- Risk assess all hazards
- Use of hazpak
- Considers likelihood and consequences
- Benefit in focussing resources on important issues

new thing learnt no 2 = employees obligations

- employees aren't liable
- but cant interfere
- ideally should participate
- ways to get participation include committees

new thing learnt no 3 = PPE used last

- hierarchy of controls
- why PPE last
- also must have supervision and training in use

change 1 – Create a OHS Committee

- have a committee across workplace – explain different sections
- outline when company must legally have one
- why committee would be a benefit
 - o awareness by minutes and agendas
 - o check that inspections and risks being actioned
 - o involvement each work section as have different OHS issues and sometime can impact one another
 - o show OHS is important
 - o types of activities Cttee can do to promote safety
- How get Cttee started
 - o Speak to manager
 - o Email everyone – role of Cttee
 - o Email each team for nominees
 - o Vote if necessary
 - o Training to be organised
- Costs – time of staff and training
- Estimate current lost time due to accidents; compare this cost with Cttee and see what reduction in “how many days lost” needs to be achieved to cover the cost – ie the measure of success

Step 3 – Conduct Research / Review Your Recommendations

Remember that your Report is often summarising actual research that you have to do. So don't forget to do it. This may mean that your initial ideas are proven to be impractical or too costly to justify ...

This means you need to go back to the drawing board either with your idea, or on how you will justify it.

For example – in the Safety Report example – one of the key planning points was:

- Estimate current lost time due to accidents; compare this cost with Cttee and see what reduction in “how many days lost” needs to be achieved to cover the cost – ie the measure of success

If we found out that the measure of success this way was unachievable – we may reconsider whether a Safety Committee would be a cost effective option. We may decide then to investigate and recommend another option or justify the Cttee on the basis on non-financial reasons.

Step 4 - Report Format

At this stage it is appropriate to start looking at the format of our Report.

Generally, a report will include the following sections:

- Title page
- Abstract (summary)
- Table of contents
- Introduction *
- Body *
- Recommendations/ Conclusion *
- References
- Appendices

However for short reports you may only want to include those parts marked *

You would normally start by writing the Body first, then the Recommendations, and then add the remaining parts. In that way you focus on the main part of the report first and then come back and “wrap it up”.

Details follow on each part of a Report:

The Body of Your Report

The body is usually the longest part of the report, and it includes all of the evidence that readers need to have in order to understand the subject. This evidence includes:

- details
- data
- results of tests
- facts
- and conclusions.

Exactly what you include in the body and how it is organized will be determined by the context in which you are writing.

In general, the body of a research report will include three distinct sections:

- a section in which you discuss the materials and methods you used in your research
- a section on theories, models, and your own hypothesis
- a section in which you present and interpret the results of your research.

However many College Reports specify the content eg the Safety Example we have used earlier asks for 3 things learnt and 1 change you will implement. This suggests a structure where there are 4 main parts to the body – the 3 things learnt and the change you would make. Given the details requested in the report – the last section on the change would be a much larger part of the report – with a number of separate paragraphs addressing that issue.

A good practical approach to starting the Body – is to use your planning notes as the basis. Each point should be expanded so it is its own paragraph or in some cases multiple paragraphs addressing that point.

When writing paragraphs try and adopt the approach of having the first sentence explain what this paragraph is looking at; and then have subsequent sentences that expand and support your idea.

Body paragraphs can be long or short, but each paragraph should have only one key idea in it. If you have more ideas – break the paragraph up into multiple paragraphs.

Your Body should be 75% of your Report.

Ensure it addresses all aspects sought in the question.

Recommendations / Conclusions

Research Reports put much more detail in the Recommendations section.

However for the purposes of your College work, the Recommendations/ Conclusions section should simply “sum up” the results of your report, particularly when you have considered several ways to resolve a problem or improve a situation and want to determine which one is best.

You should not introduce new ideas in the recommendations section, but rely on the evidence presented in the results and conclusions sections.

Introduction Contents

The introduction prepares readers for the discussion that follows by introducing:

- the purpose,
 - scope, and
 - background
- of the research.

The audience for your report largely determines the length of the introduction and the amount of detail included in it. You should include enough detail so that someone knowledgeable in your field can understand the subject and your research.

You should begin your introduction at the top of a new page. Start with the report's full title. The title is followed by the word Introduction. Eg

Q24. Report into Improvements to ABCs Customer Service Practices
--

Introduction

Most introductions contain three parts to provide context for the research:

- purpose,
- scope, and
- background information.

These parts often overlap one another, and sometimes one of them may be omitted simply because there is no reason for it to be included.

It is very important to consider the **purpose** of your research and your report in the introduction. If you do not completely understand what the purpose is, there is little chance that the reader will understand your purpose either. The following questions will help you to think about the purpose of your research and your reason for writing a report:

- What did you discover or prove?
- What kind of problem did you work on?
- Why did you work on this problem? If the problem was assigned, try to imagine why the College assigned this particular problem; what were you supposed learn from working on it?

- Why are you writing this report?
- What should the reader know or understand when they are finished reading the report?

Note the purpose of your report is NOT to do a report for the College – the purpose is based on what the content will achieve in your workplace.

An example of a purpose section in an Introduction:

This report justifies and recommends 3 possible ways to improve the way ABC delivers its customer service. The need for improvement was triggered by a 20% increase in the number of customer complaints that have occurred over the past year. The implementation of the recommendations would address these problems and reduce the complaint level by 50% to below previous years levels.

Scope refers to the ground covered by the report and will outline the method of investigation used in the project. Considering the scope of your research and analysis in the introduction will help readers to understand the parameters of your research and your report.

It will also help you to identify limiting factors on your research and acknowledge these early in the report. For example, if 18 methods for improving customer service were investigated but only 4 are discussed in the report, the scope indicates what factors (such as cost, delivery time, and availability of space) limited the selection” Scope may also include defining important terms.

These questions will help you to think about the scope of both your research and your report:

- How did you work on the research problem?
- Why did you work on the problem the way you did?
- Were there other obvious approaches you could have taken to this problem? What were the limitations you faced that prevented your trying other approaches?
- What factors contributed to the way you worked on this problem? What factor was most important in deciding how to approach the problem?

An example of a scope section in an Introduction:

A range of possible improvements were identified through brainstorming sessions with staff and consultation with customers. However, only those suggestions that a) could be implemented within 1 month and b) cost less than \$2000 to implement were seriously considered. The decision as to which solutions to recommend was arrived at through team consultation, on the basis that the people closer to the problem will be more likely to identify problems, and their commitment to the solution would be important to its successful implementation.

Background Information includes facts that the reader must know in order to understand the discussion that follows. These facts may include descriptions of conditions or events that caused the problem and details of previous work and reports on the problem or closely related problems. You might also want to review academic theories that have a bearing on the topic.

Ask yourself:

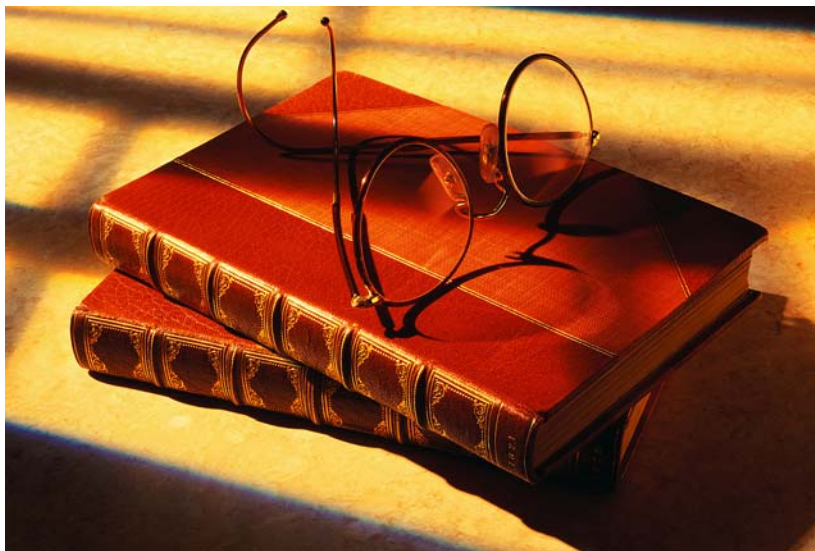
- What facts does the reader need to know in order to understand the discussion that follows?
- Why has the problem arisen?
- Who has done previous work on this problem?
- What theory or model informed your problem?
- What facts are already known that support or don't fit the theory?
- What will the reader know about the subject already and what will you need to tell them so they can understand the significance of your work?

An example of a background section in an Introduction:

The background to this problem is that ABC has had significant growth in the past 2 years. This has resulted in more staff who have less experience with the company. This may be a contributing factor to the problems that are arising, and any solutions must be suitable for a high growth and high staff turnover environment.

A TQM approach has been taken in the process of identifying the recommendations for improvement. This approach, and in particular the steps of measuring of problems and setting benchmarks are built into the future recommendations.

As the existing staff have in many cases been with the company for a long time, consideration has been taken into "change management" theory with particular reference to Professor Kanter's research on the essential skills to lead change.



Appendix 1 – Glossary of Key Words

A GLOSSARY OF KEY WORDS USED IN HSC EXAM PAPERS IN ALL SUBJECTS	
Account, Account for	State reasons for, report on. Give an account of: narrate a series of events or transactions
Analyse	Identify components and the relationship between them; draw out and relate implications
Apply	Use, utilise, employ in a particular situation
Appreciate	Make a judgement about the value of
Assess	Make a judgment of value, quality, outcomes, results or size
Calculate	Ascertain/determine from given facts, figures or information
Clarify	Make clear or plain
Classify	Arrange or include in classes/categories
Compare	Show how things are similar or different
Construct	Make; build; put together items or arguments
Contrast	Show how things are different or opposite
Critically (analyse/evaluate)	Add a degree or level of accuracy, depth, knowledge and understanding, logic, questioning, reflection and quality to (analysis/evaluation)
Deduce	Draw conclusions
Define	State meaning and identify essential qualities
Demonstrate	Show by example
Describe	Provide characteristics and features
Discuss	Identify issues and provide points for and/or against
Distinguish	Recognise or note/indicate as being distinct or different from; to note differences between
Evaluate	Make a judgement based on criteria; determine the value of
Examine	Inquire into
Explain	Relate cause and effect; make the relationships between things evident; provide why and/or how
Extract	Choose relevant and/or appropriate details
Extrapolate	Infer from what is known
Identify	Recognise and name
Interpret	Draw meaning from

Investigate	Plan, inquire into and draw conclusions about
Justify	Support an argument or conclusion
Outline	Sketch in general terms; indicate the main features of
Predict	Suggest what may happen based on available information
Propose	Put forward (for example a point of view, idea, argument, suggestion) for consideration or action
Recall	Present remembered ideas, facts or experiences
Recommend	Provide reasons in favour
Recount	Retell a series of events
Summarise	Express, concisely, the relevant details
Synthesise	Putting together various elements to make a whole

Glossary of Key words information from '2002 HSC Update Newsletter 2' published by the Board of Studies.

Sources:

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/workshops/hypertext/reportW/index.html>