Eight guidelines for report writing

By Tiffany Markman

You'll agree that what I'm about to say is not rocket science. Here goes: a report is written to be read by someone else. Now, if this is the central goal, a lot of your focus should fall on that 'someone else', and on giving them what they need, in a format that'll work for them, so that they read what you've written and rapidly agree with it.

1. Know your purpose

This is the major aim: the reason you're writing the report in the first place. Because it determines the *kind* of report you write, it's a critical (and often neglected) first step.

Give it a think. Are you writing a factual, instructional or leading report? Remember:

- Factual reports aim to inform.
- Instructional reports aim to explain.
- Leading reports aim to persuade.

Once your major aim has been defined this way, your subsidiary aims will fall into place - you inform in order to *explain*, and inform and explain in order to *persuade*. This starting point gives you vital focus, and drives absolutely everything else.

2. Know your readers

Before you start writing your report, consider its audience. Why? Because you can't hit the nail on the head if you can't see the bleedin' nail. In short, to be successful, a report must ensure that its target readers can:

- read it without delay;
- understand everything in it without much effort;
- accept its facts, findings, conclusions and recommendations; and
- decide to take the action recommended.

Achieving this demands more than presenting the facts accurately. It also means that you must communicate acceptably and intelligibly to the reader. But who is he/she?

We can get a clearer picture of our reader by asking three questions:

- What does the reader know?
- What are the reader's attitudes?
- What does the reader want?

> **Note:** Sometimes it can be difficult to answer these questions, especially when writing for a varied readership. If so, aim for the most important or primary reader.

3. Know your objective

By matching the purpose to the reader, you are ready to set your objective. In other words, what do you want the reader to think and do after reading your report? (People are not brainiacs - often, you have to make it explicit. 'Do *this*...!')

Here's an example of an objective:

To persuade my MD to authorise a proposed system of flexible working hours

The words "*persuade*" and "*authorize*" are the biggies here. They show that you must produce a logical and consistent case: one that will spur your MD to act. Also, once you've set the objective, you can anticipate the likely problems in meeting them - such as the fact that your MD likes to see all staff standing briskly to attention at 7am.

4. Choose an approach

I recommend a top-down approach to writing a report. This starts with the thesis statement (pretentiously also called the "terms of reference"), follows with the information-gathering and continues into three stages of ongoing refinement.

- **Thesis** - the thesis of a report is a guiding statement used to define the scope of the research or investigation. This helps you to communicate your information clearly and to be selective when collecting it.

- **Info-gathering** - there are a number of questions to ask at this stage:

    - What information do I need?
    - How much do I need?
    - Where will I find it?
    - How will I collect it?

- **Refinement** - there are three stages in the refinement process; namely:

    - Write the section-level outline.
    - Write the subsection-level outline.

    - Write the paragraph-level outline.

    > **Tip:** The paragraph-level outline is like a presentation with bulleted points. It incorporates the flow of ideas. Once you have the paragraph-level flow of ideas, you can convert it into a full report by writing out the flow of ideas in full sentences. Like I said, hardly rocket science. But sometimes you just need someone to show you...

5. Decide on structure

Here are 11 basic elements of a standard report. I'm not a masochist, so this structure does not need to be rigidly adhered to. Instead, bring your own circumstances, needs and creativity to the mix, and use whatever's appropriate.

1. Title page

2. Index (or Contents)
3. Thesis (or Terms of Reference or Abstract)
4. Introduction (or Executive Summary)
5. Background
6. Procedure
7. Implications (or Issues)
8. Solutions (or Recommendations)
9. Conclusion
10. Appendices
11. Bibliography (or References)

6. Use the right style

Use hard facts and figures, evidence and justification. Use efficient language - big reports with too many words are awful. The best reports are simple and quick to read because the writer has interpreted the data and developed viable recommendations.

Here are some tips:

1. Write as you speak.
2. Avoid empty words.
3. Use descending order of importance.
4. Use the active voice.
5. Keep sentences short.
6. Don't try to impress; write to express.
7. Get facts 100% right.
8. Be unbiased and open.

7. Consider layout

- *Fonts*

  Remember that reports are conservative and often formal documents, so your font choices should not be cutesy, clever or sexy. For the body of the document, choose a serif font such as Times Roman or Cambria with a point size of 11 or 12. You can use a sans serif font such as Arial or Calibri for bolded headings to complement the body text.

- *Visuals*

  Spend time thinking about the pictures. Wherever necessary, explain all aspects of a visual and don't leave the reader wondering about the connection between the figure and the text. Write good captions, and choose *the type of visual* with careful consideration. (Bar graphs, pie charts and tables do different things, for example.)

8. Leave time to refine

No report is perfect, and definitely not when it's still Draft 1. Unfortunately, well-written reports are those that have gone through the mill a couple of times, either with your gimlet eye or under the skeptical gaze of someone else. Leave as much time as you can afford to check, check and double-check, and then ask yourself:

- Overall, does the report fulfill its purpose?
- Does it do what I was asked to do?

- Does it do what I said I'd do in my introduction?

- And bottom line: Am I pleased with it?

A final word

I'm going to ignore my own advice here and stubbornly refuse to write a proper conclusion. I hate them. They're completely boring. So let's just use this space to congratulate you on having read this far - you're a champ! - and that's that.

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