

Writing reports

Reports usually get broken down into three categories

1. Informal reports and updates: typically a short report used within the HSE and service departments. The short, informal, report is usually written in the first person (I or We), unlike the formal report in which the use of first person is usually for the sake of complete objectivity.
2. Formal reports and updates for the Board, HSE Management Team, Government Departments; Oireachtas committees etc. In style, a formal report is usually impersonal and restrained in tone. The writer or writers generally do not use the first person (I or We), but used third-person reference in some such ways. "It was found" and "the writers are of the opinion".
3. Public reports such as Annual Reports; strategy documents etc

The same basic rules and principles apply to each type of report. Map out your structure **before you begin** researching and writing your report. Identify what type of report you are writing and the main purpose, for example are you:

- Giving information?
- Seeking to persuade?
- Setting out an option appraisal?
- Presenting a research report?

Ensure the purpose, aims and scope of the report are clearly explained in your terms of reference. The executive summary should be very concise, summarising the main recommendations and findings. Provide interpretation of situations and options; show the important hard facts and figures. Your recommendations should include implications, with values and costs where applicable. Unless yours is a highly complex study, limit the executive summary to less than two sides of standard business paper.

The body of the report should be divided into logical sections. The content must be very concise. Use hard facts and figures, evidence and justification. Use efficient language - big reports with too many words are not impressive. The best reports are simple and quick to read because the writer has properly interpreted the data and developed viable recommendations.

Do not cram lots of detail, diagrams, figures, evidence, references etc., into the main body of the report. Index and attach these references as appendices at the end of the report. Where you state figures or evidence you must always identify the source. Show figures in columns. Try to support important figures with a graph. If it's appropriate to acknowledge contributors then do so in the introduction or a separate section at the end.

Typical structure template for writing a report:

- Title, author, date
- Contents
- Introduction and Terms of Reference (or aims/scope for report)
- Executive Summary (1-2 pages maximum) containing main points of evidence, recommendations and outcomes
- Background/history/situation
- Implications/issues/opportunities/threats, with source-referenced facts and figures evidence
- Solution/action/decision options with implications/effects/results, including financials and parameters inputs and outputs
- Recommendations and actions with input and outcomes values and costs
- Appendices
- Optional Bibliography and Acknowledgements
- HSE reference number, logo and publication date
- Page numbers – all pages should be numbered with the exception of title and content pages
- Long reports should have numbered headings and numbers on sub-sections so that readers can easily refer to paragraphs etc.

Who will read this document?

Before you start writing, do your best to identify who will read your document. Will it be just one person or is it for a larger audience? If you're writing for several audiences, they may have different expectations and levels of knowledge. If so, can you identify one of them as your main reader: the audience whose interests you most need to satisfy?

If you can, it may be best to write the document as if you're writing just for this main audience. Trying to satisfy the needs of several different audiences at once can be very difficult. You risk ending up with a document that tries to be everything to everyone yet ends up being nothing to anyone.

Before you start writing, identify how much your readers already understand.

Before you start to write that next report ask yourself these three questions:

- * Who will read this?
- * Why do they want this information?
- * What do they already know?

Once you've answered these questions, you stand a good chance of submitting a report that will be both useful and well received.

Writing reports when you're not sure what's required

If ever you are confronted with the task of writing a report and you are unsure of how to go about it, here are some tips.

It's common to be asked to write reports for all kinds of reasons. Sometimes reports are requested with clear terms of reference and criteria, but mostly they are not. It's common for reports to be requested with a vague idea given as to what is actually needed - commonly there is no written 'brief' or specification.

The writer then struggles over what the report should include and look like, how long it should be, whether to include recommendations, whether to attach detailed information, etc. Discuss and agree the report specification with the person requesting it - define the criteria by asking helpful questions, such as -

- Is there a written specification or 'terms of reference' for this report?
- Where did the original request for this report come from and what do you think they expect and need?
- Can we find out more about what is expected from this report?
- How many words or pages?
- Who this report is for and what will they use it for?
- What format is preferred – does a template exist?
- Would people actually prefer a PowerPoint presentation of the main points instead of a report that no-one will read?
- Do you want recommendations and actions in the report? Or just a conclusion?
- Do you want detail referenced and appended or available on request?
- Is this report really truly necessary? - might there be a better quicker more effective way to give the person asking for it what they actually need, whatever that is?

When writing anything - especially reports - the shorter the better is normally the case as most long reports generally don't get read. When faced with a vague request to "Write a report..." **ask people what they want:**

Ask some helpful questions to agree a sensible report format, length, outcomes, etc., - you will avoid the guesswork and save time.