Structure of a Report

A formal report has a number of parts. Broadly speaking, all reports must include:

- an introduction
- the body or ‘development’ of the report
- a conclusion
- a list of references consulted (bibliography)

A detailed look at the parts of a report would run as follows (report ‘headings’ are bolded):

1. **Title Page**: stating the name & number of your course, your teacher/s’ name/s, name of the report and your own name/s & student number/s; and the date of submission.

2. **Acknowledgements**: used in formal reports to thank those who have given assistance.

3. **Table of Contents**: should be included; word processors generate these automatically. Lists of graphical materials (“figures”) and/or tables used should follow the Contents page/s, where these are applicable.

4. **Abstract**: used in formal reports: a short summary of what your report is about, and what it concludes.

5. **Introduction**: is a statement of the topic and the issues, with a little background. It can state the purpose of the report, the scope of the problems examined, and touch briefly on the approaches or methods used to gather information or data.

6. The Body of the report – developing your “content”:
   - **Overview**: of your field of interest, description of the ‘problem/s’ you’re addressing:
     a. this may consist of a brief description of the area you’re reporting on and the issues you’ve investigated; *or*
     b. it may be a statement of organizational goals, as in a formal business or marketing report; *or*
     c. it may be a detailed history, providing an in-depth look at the issues faced; *or*
     d. it may be a Literature Review, an in-depth review of the field and the issues, using the important published writing, the ‘literature’ of the field on the issues you’re addressing.
   - **Methodology**: how you’ve sought information or data, and the ways these are to be used.
   - **Findings**: presents a summary of your research or data. (Primary research materials such as pamphlets or specification sheets, questionnaire data or interview transcripts should be included in an Appendix, never in the body of the report.)
   - **Discussion or Analysis**: is your account of the meaning of what you’ve discovered.
   - **Action or Recommendations**: what your findings and analysis suggest should be followed or put in place. These may consist of suggested items to be purchased; or they may be an outline of business strategies to be followed; or recommendations for organisational change or social policy development.

7. **Conclusion**: reviews aims of the report, and sums up what has been discovered and suggested.

8. **Bibliography**: presents a complete formal list of all sources of information used or consulted.

9. **Appendices**: contain primary information or data; or materials which supplement/support the report.
The notes overleaf give a general picture of report form. The ‘end product’ – our report – must contain some or all of these elements – according to what is required by our topic and by course requirements.

It should be stressed that every report is intended for a definite audience, and is designed for them: a report presenting recommendations for an office network system, a report on the development of a small business and a report on a social or community issue will each have its own specific form, headings and emphases, while following the shape outlined above. But it should also be stressed here that a key feature of any individual report is uniformity of layout – heading fonts & styles and text fonts must be consistent throughout!

Now we should briefly consider the process of putting a report together – doing research & organizing our ‘content’, and getting the report itself written. (Part of what follows will draw upon, and direct you to, other Study Skills pamphlets.) Finally we should touch on language and report writing style.

**Researching & Organising your Report**

Although different reports require different types of research, it’s always best to adopt the following general approach:

- **Define your topic.** Do not start looking for information for your report until you understand what the assignment question means; or in the case of your own topic, until you’ve decided on what the core parts of the subject you’re investigating are, and where your limits should be drawn. (For more on this, see the pamphlet Understanding Assignment Questions.) At this stage also it is important to jot down a list of ‘keywords’ and key terminology for your topic area.

- **Conduct initial search** for information, using your keywords. This may involve looking at:
  - reference books (library catalogues)
  - internet sites (search engines)
  - magazines and newspapers (serials listings, CD ROM’s, on-line databases)

See pamphlet Doing Library Research for more on this. And as you gather information and material, you should already be thinking about how you’re going to organise the information you’re collecting.

- **Prepare initial bibliography.** It’s vital to begin listing your references from the start. This is best done in a word processor, using the Bibliography of your ‘report layout’ (see below on laying out reports).

- **Organise your information:**
  - brainstorm the points from your initial research which you think are important to the topic
  - mind map these points to explore their connections and structure (circle your points and draw in connections)
  - write an initial outline. This should be an informal sketch, covering how you see the introduction, report body and conclusion.

See pamphlet Organising Assignment Responses on brainstorming, mind mapping and outlining!

- **Read further in the topic** to gather secondary data to confirm and modify your view of your topic as outlined above.

- **Conduct primary research** as necessary; e.g. questionnaires, interviews, laboratory tests, etc.

- **Analyse** your primary research data, arranging it appropriately in tabular and/or graphical form, using statistical tools if necessary.

- **Reorganise your structure:** drawing on your initial & secondary research, and any primary research, modify your mind map/s and initial outline. This modified outline will be a basic planning guide as you write.

- You will probably be using the Author/Date in-text referencing system: be sure your reference list is typed in the appropriate format (see pamphlet Referencing and Bibliographies on these points).
Writing & Editing your Report

Laying Out the Report

Starting with your outline, you’re going to write a first draft, which you’ll edit into a final version. But before you start drafting, it’s important at this point, if not before, to know what the parts of your particular report are, and what their headings will be. Using our outline, we consult the assignment notes, and/or our course guide, and jot down our formal headings. Consider these examples:

| You’re doing research into the opinions of women users of a medical centre. Your instructor says the report format should formal. You decide on: |
| You’re writing a marketing plan for a business course. The report format is specified by your course guide: |

1. Title Page
2. Table of Contents
3. Acknowledgements
4. Executive Summary
5. Introduction
6. Research issue
7. Aims of Research
8. Methodology
9. Research Questions
10. Participants’ Responses
11. Analysis
12. Recommendations
13. Conclusion
14. References

Once we’ve determined the parts and headings, the best way to begin writing is to open the Word document into which we’ve been entering our references, and make a formal ‘report layout’ comprised of our headings and sub-headings (uniformly formatted using Word’s “Heading” styles). We complete our layout by generating an initial table of contents, to check the structure of our headings and sub-headings. We can do this using the following process:

- **Draft a title page** – and when you’ve finished, check in the Style panel of the Formatting toolbar that all text in the title page is in “Normal” style. Insert a Page Break at the end of your title page. (Insert menu.)

- **Open a ‘Table of Contents’ page** by typing this heading (Normal style) and inserting a page break.

- **Enter main headings** in “Heading 1” style from the toolbar Style panel, or from Format (menu): Styles dialogue. Don’t type heading numbers, but do insert a few blank lines and a page break after each main heading.

- **Type sub-headings** now, with suitable spacing, using Heading 2 (or Heading 3) style. Insert a few blank lines after each. Don’t type numbers!

- **Create heading numbering** by dragging your cursor over – thus ‘selecting’ – all your headings, and hitting the Numbering button on your toolbar.

- **Format your numbering system** using Format (menu): Bullets & Numbering: Outline Numbering, and selecting the numbering system you need. To create sub-heading numbers, select the sub-headings and hit the Increase Indent button on the toolbar. The results should look something like this:

### 1. Introduction

1.1 Mission Statement

1.2 Corporate Goals

- **Generate a table of contents** by placing the cursor in table of contents page, and selecting Insert (menu): Index and Tables: Table of Contents. Word sees the Heading style items and automatically generates the table (with your layout document page numbers). Thus you can check your headings:

```
1. Introduction........................................................... 3
  1.1 Mission Statement......................................... 3
  1.2 Corporate Goals......................................... 3
  2. Current Objectives........................................ 3
  3. Market Overview........................................... 3
    3.1 Market Research......................................... 3
    3.2 Market Analysis......................................... 3
    3.3 Consumer Analysis..................................... 3
  4. Marketing Objectives....................................... 3
    4.1 Sales...................................................... 3
    4.2 Market Share........................................... 3
    5. Marketing Strategies.................................... 3
      5.1 Growth Strategy...................................... 3
      5.2 Competitive Strategy................................ 3
      5.3 Positioning Strategy................................ 3
      5.4 Marketing Mix...................................... 3
    6. Budgets..................................................... 3
    7. Marketing Evaluation.................................... 3
    8. References................................................ 3
```

(N.B. the page numbers here relate to this page we’re on!)

Now we can begin writing!
Drafting the Report

Now we have our report layout, and our initial table of contents (which can be renewed whenever and as many times as we want) – it’s best to consult our original outline and other materials again, and decide where we want to begin writing. As we’ve stressed in the pamphlet Organising Assignment Responses, it’s often best to start writing at the end of the report!

- **Beginning at the end:**
  - you should have already written much of your bibliography; and if you have thought out points for your conclusion, it’s a good idea to draft an initial version of this now, to get started.
  - If you do start at the end, continue by looking at your draft outline, and write next the section you feel most confident about. Then write other sections.

- **Beginning nearer the beginning:**
  - go to the top of your draft outline, and start writing the ‘body’ of your report first.
  - The overview is a good place to start; and if you’re writing a literature review, the careful presentation of your field and its literature will give you a focus which will guide you through the other sections of your draft.

- **Finishing at the beginning:**
  - after you’ve drafted all or nearly all your report, go to the top of your report, to the Summary (if present) and the Introduction, and draft these now.
  - *Word* can also generate summaries, from the Tools (menu): *AutoSummarize* dialogue; but products of this automated process should be used as guides or very rough drafts only.
  - Now, if you haven’t done so before, you should generate a new table of contents (select existing table and go Insert: Index and Tables: Table of Contents, and say “yes” to the question “Replace?”). Check structure, make sure no new headings or sub-headings are missing, and that the page numbers are correct.

Editing and Proofreading

Re-read everything you’ve written to get an overall picture of your report. Correct any minor errors you see, and jot notes as to more major changes you may want to make. Now you’re ready to begin editing and proofreading, to produce your finished report!

**Editing** is a process of reading critically and making changes. One vital critical question to ask as you read relates to your heading structure: *are you making your content clear to the reader, do you need a new sub-heading here?* If so, add the new sub-heading in Heading 2 (or 3) style, hit the Increase Indent button, and you’ll find that *Word* automatically updates your heading number system. (A new table of contents will reflect these changes.)

As you edit, there are other questions you must keep asking:

- **Is the flow of ideas logical & coherent?**
  - are your ideas thoroughly described?
  - are all ideas supported by reference to major concepts or authorities of the field considered?
  - are assumptions explained & supported?
  - are you connecting one idea up with the next? Are you indicating the logical connections with “but”, “however”, etc.?
  - are you giving the reader feedback about what you’re writing, and where you’re going? (summing up what you’ve said, pointing to what you’re going to say next.)

- **Is your expression clear, simple & concise?**
  - are you saying what you mean to say?
  - is terminology explained & used properly?
  - are you stating the topic of each paragraph clearly, and opening a new paragraph when the topic changes?

- **Are you controlling the flow of ideas yourself, and not relying upon slabs of other people’s work – even if referenced?**

- **Is all quoted or paraphrased material relevant? and is all quoted or paraphrased material referenced?**

- **Is graphical material used clear, well presented, & well integrated into the text?**
Editing and Proofreading (continued)

Editing doesn’t always happen in a straight-line, continuous way: as we re-write one section, thoughts about changes in another may come to mind, and we should jump to edit there. (When we return to the original section, we always start in an area of the text we’ve already edited, so as to approach unedited writing from its context!)

Thus the process of editing and re-drafting is recursive, that is, it moves in a circle and is, to a degree, repetitive. One danger though in this is that the beginning of our report will get more attention than the final sections: care should be taken to read these carefully in turn, and more than once.

When the final draft has emerged from the editing process, it’s time to proofread for errors. We re-read again, correcting for spelling, grammar, sentence meaning, paragraph structure, and the overall style of our text (reading aloud, to activate other areas of brain processing!) And last of all: we generate a final table of contents!

**Language & Report Writing Style**

Report language and style are quite critical, and while they vary from subject area to area, we can make the following generalisations:

**The language of reports avoids the personal:** since a report aims to present knowledge gained and suggest actions to be taken – not to present personal opinions. One way to achieve this is to make ‘objects’ active: as in “this report suggests…”,”our findings show…” etc.

**Another aspect of report language is its formality:** it avoids everyday speech, not to present a facade of expertise or authority, but because everyday speech is loose in meaning, often depending upon a speaker’s voice tones, facial expression and gestures to communicate meaning. In this sense, a report is impoverished, having nothing but its language; and therefore the language used must be as precise and unambiguous as possible.

Thus avoiding the personal and informal is of paramount importance, though the degree to which we do so will vary, depending upon the purpose and audience of the report. And as well as these primary considerations, certain other aspects of report writing style should be touched upon:

- **Non-discriminatory/non-sexist language:** if we are generalising about people, we must include both sexes and all relevant groups. And no group or personal characteristic should be named irrelevantly. This includes references to nationality, gender, ethnic background, etc.

One way of ensuring language is non-sexist is the use of slashed pronouns, as in “s/he”, “her/his” etc. A better usage is the general plural, “they”, “their”.

- **Abbreviations:** or ‘acronyms’ are important in reports, helping us avoid repeating the names of much cited organizations. But they must be used with care. In the first reference to an organisation, its name must be given in full, with its acronym placed immediately following, in parenthesis, e.g. “The Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture (VFST) is a rehabilitation center established in 1987…”

Later references can now use the abbreviation, e.g. “The VFST works closely with local government and other agencies…” But the abbreviation shouldn’t be used exclusively: it’s important to remind the reader just who the VFST is, thus the organisation’s name should be used at intervals. And of course, no other organisation may be referred to by this abbreviation in the same report!

- **Your own style:** while a report should be impersonal in its language, well written reports have their own style, and you should aim at this. Toward the creation of the sense of a mind at work in your report, take care to avoid overly repeating words or expressions, as this dulls the reader to your writing texture, and to your meaning.

And remember, your style is detectable: don’t be tempted to use the words of others as your own. This is plagiarism, a serious offence, and it is immediately apparent to the reader. Your mind and your own style are the best way of expressing the details and findings of your report. Above all, work carefully, and trust yourself and your own judgement.