

2. Define a report

When considering whether to write a report it is important to be clear about what you hope to achieve and what response you desire from your readers. The starting position is to decide whether a report is the most appropriate means of communicating your information. If potential readers are familiar with the information and the issues, a report may not be necessary. Perhaps you are seeking a decision based on known facts and agreed issues. If that is the case, writing a summary paper and asking for a decision may be more appropriate. This is not to deter you from report writing but to help you clarify when a report is needed.

Here is a definition:

A report is a document presenting researched facts, formal statements and findings (or results) of some individual or group.

It may be for internal use and distribution to a few people within a company. It may be for external use and publication for the readership of many people. Whatever the intended readership, the purpose of a report is to put across information with a conclusion.

Most reports are written to elicit reader response, whether it is for agreement, approval or some form of action. There are exceptions. A motoring report for instance is usually written to inform.

But whether your report is a few pages long or runs to a hundred pages, you will want people to read it. For this reason your report needs to have clear purpose, be well researched, planned and structured. It should also be clear, interesting and persuasive.

There are of course many different types of report, but what all effective reports have in common, is readability. Here are some report types:

- Annual report
- Case study report
- Committee report
- Compliance report
- Feasibility study report
- Financial report
- Health and Safety report
- Progress report
- Technical report

2.1 Types of report

Annual report

An annual report is generally produced by a company at the end of each year. It usually features the chairman's assessment of the previous year's trading position and his assessment of the company's readers. It should include all relevant financial information. Its purpose is to give full information about the company for investors and stakeholders.

Case study report

A case study is a real life example of an event, a company or project which can give valuable insight into situations. The value of a case study is that it supports theory and hypothesis and provides lessons on the application of ideas in the real world.

Committee report

Most large organisations are divided into groups and have committees of one form or other. Reports may be produced on a variety of subjects with which the committee is involved.

Compliance report

Compliance is an important factor in a complex world. This report is about analysing whether the rules, policy and regulations are being upheld or breached. It normally focuses on how breaches can be minimised and how rules can be upheld. Typically, it involves facts, figures, findings and recommendations.

Feasibility study report

Most companies commission feasibility studies to decide whether a particular course of action is desirable, practical or viable. If it concerns developing products or services, it would cover most of the topics to be found in a business plan including product or service descriptions, competition, resources, costs, cash flow and sales and marketing.

Financial report

A financial report looks at the finances of an organisation. It covers income and expenses for the period, liabilities, assets, operating costs and profit. In essence, it provides information on the value of an organisation.

Health and safety report

This may focus on areas where there are believed to be health risks and what needs to be put in place to minimise those risks. Topics may include assessment, regulation, policy, enforcement and recommendation.

Progress report

This is written to inform on progress of a piece of work over a given time. It normally covers topics such as what has been done, how much there is to do, how things are progressing, issues, possible changes and budget adherence.

Technical report

A technical report is written for a technical audience. It may be reporting on existing technology with recommendations to upgrade. It may focus on new product design, features, functionality and viability. By necessity the report will include many facts and figures.

2.2 Why write a report?

Once the purpose of the report has been decided, every section of the report should be written in order to support that purpose.

Reports should be written to:

- Inform
- Persuade
- Instruct
- Elicit response
- Generate action