



WRITING BUSINESS REPORTS

WHAT IS A BUSINESS REPORT AND HOW DO I WRITE ONE?

Business reports can take different forms. Generally, they are concise documents that first inform by summarizing and analyzing key facts and situations and then make recommendations to the person or group asking for the report. **One example**—four small county hospitals are no longer covering their expenses and are costing taxpayers dearly. Each operates very differently from the others. Some legislators think the least profitable hospitals should be closed while some taxpayers think all four should be consolidated into one regional administrative unit. An independent task force is considering all the feasible alternatives and will make a final recommendation to the county. You have been asked to write a report to this task force. You have an array of data collected from the hospitals as well as information about the communities they serve and available literature on hospital administration to draw from. Before writing this or any report, you must ask yourself two important questions:

1. **Who is my audience?** (In business, this is likely to be either your supervisors or clients, such as the task force above,¹ who will read your report.)
2. **What is my purpose?** (This is what your readers need to know to do their job.)

If you don't understand your audience and purpose, you are not likely to create a report that meets the needs of those who will be reading it.

AUDIENCE: In the example above, you must write your report as if you were writing not to your professor, but rather to the **task force members**. Who are they? Legislators? Nurses? Lawyers? Administrators? Taxpayers? All of these?

Whoever they are, you need to ask and answer the following: What do they already know before they read your report? What do you want them to know after they've read it? What are their backgrounds? What are their likely biases? How do they approach problems—for example, would certain kinds of information and terminology be understood by the medical staff but not by administrators? The medical staff would be familiar with information on risks and benefits of certain medications for certain patients, while administrators would be familiar with government regulations on Medicare reimbursement. Use information, explanations, and language familiar to your specific readers.

PURPOSE: Once you fully understand the audience for your report and re-consider your assignment with them in mind, your purpose (goals) should become clear. Most likely, your writing goals will be to inform by summarizing key information; analyze by comparing costs, or

¹ If you are writing for a class assignment, don't think of your professor as your only audience; the assignment is designed to test your ability to address a particular audience, one identified in the case you will be working with.

strengths and weaknesses; and possibly recommend certain actions based on the facts and data you have presented. In the hospital case, for example, your job is to give the taskforce the important facts² and background so that its members can make an informed decision and be able to back it up if questioned.

CAN I JAZZ UP MY WRITING TO BE MORE CREATIVE AND PERSONAL?

When you inform or analyze for a business report, your job is not to dazzle with vocabulary, jargon, or complex sentences. Creative, adjective-filled prose does not belong in a business report. You can generally use “you,” but should avoid “I,” as well as slang or contractions. What your clients want is prose that is objective, succinct, non-emotive, and above all, factual.

Consider the connotations of language in the following sentences:

1. **Subjective and Emotive Writing:** *The hospital’s lazy unproductive “down in the dumps” slackers were ready to turn in their brooms.*

This sentence sounds like something from a cheap novel or talk radio; it’s loaded with negative connotations.

2. **Objective and Unbiased Writing:** *The custodians who had not met their recent productivity goals were willing to discuss change.*

This sentence, on the other hand, doesn’t judge the employees, and it suggests that they want some kind of change.

Let your facts and clear writing—not loaded words—do the persuading.

HOW CAN I MAKE MY WRITING FIT MY AUDIENCE AND PURPOSE?

1. First, read your assigned task carefully and then do some important pre-writing:
 - a. Determine your audience: what are their needs and how much background do they have? This last is really important because you don’t want to bore readers with information they already know or summaries of every little detail. At the same time, you don’t want to skip key points or write over their heads by ignoring important definitions. Jot down what you think your readers will know or believe *before* they read your report.
 - b. Next, define your purpose. Write down what you want your readers to know *after* reading your report—this is your writing goal.
2. Draft your report carefully, being certain to respond to all of the things you have been asked to include. Subheadings help readers follow your ideas. Typical short reports have the following sections: Terms of Reference, Procedure, Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations. You, however, may be asked to use different subheadings or decide on other subheadings that best reflect and organize the report.
 - a. Each section reflects a different goal.
 - b. Within a section, each paragraph should explore a single main idea—start each paragraph with a strong, unifying sentence, one that summarizes its main point.

² A report is not the place to impress your audience with all the facts you can cram in—pare down to what is most important to your particular readers. Separate “need to know” from “nice to know.”

3. Consider charts, graphs, or short bulleted lists that can quickly communicate important information to your readers.
4. Put the draft aside for at least a day. If you can, send it to others for a review:
 - a. Don't reveal the audience; instead, ask your reviewers who they think the audience is. If they can't pinpoint your intended audience, something is off base in your report.
 - b. Ask them to write down your three most important points. If they name three things that aren't what you think are most important, you have work to do.
 - c. Also ask them to note where things are unclear, "fluffy," or out of place.
 - d. Finally, because you want to be as objective as possible, ask your reviewers to circle words or passages that seem subjective or too emotive.

Consider reviewers' comments with an open mind. You may think you've communicated what you intended, but it may not have come out that way. Don't take it personally.

5. Before you revise your draft, re-read your assigned task one final time. Often in the heat of writing, we get off track and include things that aren't required or neglect to provide information that we've been asked for.
6. Revise for wordiness. Consider the following:
 - a. *In my opinion, the main problem is....* (revise to "The main problem is...")
 - b. *There are numerous considerations that will influence your decision* (revise to "Numerous considerations will influence your decision.")
 - c. *In today's business world, accountants are maintainers of corporate productivity* (revise to "Accountants today help maintain corporate productivity.")

Cutting two or three unneeded words per sentence doesn't create dull writing; rather, it creates tight, easy-to-read reports that will be welcomed by busy readers.

7. Proofread carefully—reading slowly and out loud helps catch things your eye might skip.

Helpful Websites & Suggested Readings:

General suggestions on writing business reports:

<http://jerz.setonhill.edu/writing/technical/reports/index.html>

Richard Lanham's "Paramedic Method" of revising your prose:

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/635/01/>

For a guide on ways to cut out extraneous wording, visit the George Mason University website, scroll down to Editing/Revising, and click on Revising and Editing for Conciseness:

<http://writingcenter.gmu.edu/resources/handouts.html>