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Chapter 7 : Writing reports and business writing in groups

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CHAPTER 7: WRITING REPORTS AND BUSINESS WRITING IN GROUPS

Quotable quote

“The pen is mightier than the sword” (Anon).

“A research paper takes the sources uncovered in a literature review and moves on from them to make an argument. It is not a report of facts, but a careful marshalling of the judgements, opinions and ideas of others to support your own opinion” (Putnis & Petelin, 1996, p. 264).

Introduction

Why is it that people who know a lot about a topic often can't write about it? Perhaps because they don't feel comfortable with the writing process. Although they can recognise good writing, the memory of being corrected in the past inhibits them from starting. They put off writing something until the very last minute, leaving no time to work with the text they have created, changing, adapting and editing it until it's good. Their feelings about being poor at writing become a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you are one of those, the hints in this chapter will help you overcome these blocks, and if you're not, will give you fresh insights into the structure of formal written communications, especially for business purposes.

Many reports are the products of group co-operation. As well as writing and researching well yourself you will find that on many occasions as a student or in your later professional life you will be required to produce written work as a member of a group. Some hints for working effectively in a group are included below.

This section divides writing into *reports*, *paragraphs*, *essays* and *letters* all of which require adherence to the following 2,000 year old tried and true structure:

Introduction:

- present the subject
- state the main idea in the form of a thesis statement
- create interest
- display a sense of the paper's purpose
- prepare audience

Proposition:

- present your ideas
- give definitions and background information

Provide Evidence:

- marshall expert opinion; moral principles; practical advantages; statistics

Meet Opposition

- present and refute opposition to your argument

Conclusion:

- summarise and emphasise your main points

Good writing is:

Correct–Check that your spelling and grammar are faultless.

Reasonable–Know what you are talking about, support your generalisations with details and give reasons for not believing opposing arguments.

Appealing– persuade readers to go from where they are to where you want them to be. Meet the needs of readers to be informed, to be entertained or challenged.

Working with Groups

How can you impress your tutor (and later on your employer or staff) with your ability to work effectively in a group?

- Learn everyone’s name and use names frequently.
- Summarise other people’s positions before you give your own ideas or solutions.
- Help the group understand you by giving reasoned arguments before you give your conclusion.
- Find common ground whenever you can by highlighting areas of agreement and/or appealing to common values.
- Towards the end of the exercise make summary statements about the topic.
- Make notes and take responsibility for being the scribe for the group, particularly when conclusions or solutions are being agreed.

Group Report Writing

Prepare for this assignment with work on paragraphs (p. 69) and group dynamics (p. 106) because skills in writing precisely and working effectively in groups are key skills in this area.

Reports are the basis of information transmission in business, the professions and government. Summaries, headings and clearly organised structures make them easy to read and access, skills in researching and presenting information and persuasive arguments in report form are a mark of the consummate professional.

What distinguishes reports from essays is their organisation and visual appeal. In written reports headings, bullet points and graphical displays of information help the reader access information easily through visual cues. Visual supports are equally important in oral presentations of reports. Naturally the oral presentation of the report demands more than “going through” the written report by reading its headings. Presenters need to stimulate their audience to read the full report by their succinct introduction to its key findings and conclusions

Writing and researching a report with a group is a valuable learning experience not only of the skills of report writing but also of group dynamics. The ability to organise and transmit ideas, information, policy and recommendations effectively through reports is a valuable skill as is the ability to work productively in groups, often a feature of modern business and professional practice.

Learning to work productively in groups helps make effective use of a variety of skills and ideas. Groups will provide greater opportunities for wider learning if they include input from people of both sexes, of different geographical and national backgrounds and from different disciplines.

Planning a Report

Your Audience:

Consider their

- present level of knowledge of the topic
- interest level in the topic
- prejudices about the topic and related areas

as well as the likelihood of their accepting your conclusion and recommendations.

Your Purpose is to?

- solve a problem?
- make a proposal and/or
- provide information for the audience to decide on a policy, or make up their minds on an issue

Needs Analysis for Problem-Solving Report

List of Problems	Causes of Problems	Solutions to Problems

Sources of Information

- library research
- interviews
- media reviews

Evidence required for report must be

- complete
- logical
- credible
- recent

Organising a Report

Decide whether to use:

- chronological order
- topic order
- problem solving order

Stages in Report Writing with a Group

1. List the main points you want to discuss. Use descriptive phrases.
2. Meet with group. Brainstorm for other ideas. Allocate areas of research.
3. Confer with group and plan reports and presentation.
4. Write your introduction. State your subject, the background information the reader needs, the main points of your report and the report's purpose.
5. Gather information on each point.
6. Make a heading of each descriptive phrase from point one and organise headings alphanumerically or according to a decimal system.
7. Arrange information under headings and develop paragraphs.
8. Re-arrange where necessary to fit chronological, topic or problem-solving order.
9. Re-write introduction to fit the report. Compose the summary and the conclusion. Write the transmittal letter and the table of contents.
10. Put in a drawer for a week.
11. Revise, edit and re-write.
12. Confer with group. Compare reports. Revise plan of presentation. Rehearse.
13. Present
14. Evaluate using the feedback sheet on p. 60
15. Re-do if appropriate

Helpful References:

Eunson, B. (1994). *Writing and presenting reports*. Brisbane: John Wiley

Windschuttle, K. & Elliot, E. (1994) *Writing, researching, communicating: Communication Skills for the information age* (2nd ed.). Sydney : McGraw-Hill. (Ch. 20, 21 & 22).

REPORT FEEDBACK SHEET

Student's Name: _____

Tutor's Name: _____

Tutorial Time: _____

Grade: _____

Assessment Check List	Check Level				
	O U T S T A N D I N G				N E E D S W O R K
INDIVIDUAL PRESENTATION:					
1. Transmittal letter. Format and content.					
2. Table of Contents (decimal or alphanumeric)					
3. Report style and format (alphanumeric or decimal headings). Use of descriptive headings. Consistency in numbering of headings at equal levels.					
4. Logical organisation of report.					
5. Effective use of transitions					
6. Meets needs of group or person authorising the report (audience).					
7. High level of content or high level of information.					
8. Analysis – contribution of each statement to the solution of the problem.					
9. Summary – gives main message in one page.					
10. Conclusion/recommendations – clearly follow from report. – clear plan OR list of principles.					
11. Acknowledgment of sources in-text and in list of references.					
12. Effective summaries of information or data in lists or tables.					
13. P.s are numbered.					
14. Use of APA referencing style for in-text references and reference list.					
15. Absence of spelling and grammar errors.					
GROUP PRESENTATION					
1. Organisation and presentation skills of group.					
2. Content or information level of presentation.					
3. Interest level of presentation.					
4. Account of Group Dynamics: Write an account of the dynamics of your group - What will you do better next time?					

Group Presentation should continue for about 12 minutes allowing time for three minutes of questions. Student presentations which take longer than this try the patience of the group which has an average attention span of fifteen minutes. Groups should allocate time among their members.

HEADING STYLES FOR TABLE OF CONTENTS

Table of Contents with Decimal System

List of Illustrations, Tables , Diagrams

Summary

Negotiation Skills of Security Staff

1.0 Introduction

2.0 Background to the Problem

2.1 Security staff duties

2.2 Hiring of Security staff

2.3 Clients and general public

3.0 Major areas of Negotiation for Security Staff

3.1 Academic Staff

3.1.1 Access to own areas

3.1.2 Access to restricted areas

3.2 Students and Visitors

3.2.1 Noise

3.2.2 Property damage

3.2.3 Access to restricted areas

3.3 Major Problem behaviour

3.3.1 Forgetfulness

3.3.2 Drunkenness

3.3.3 Unreasonableness

3.3.4 Arrogance

3.4 Desired Security Image

3.4.1 Reasonable

3.4.2 Polite

3.4.3 Efficient

4.0 Appropriate Negotiation Skills and Training Activities

5.0 Recommendations

6.0 References

7.0 Appendixes

Table of Contents with Alphanumeric Outline System

List of Illustrations, Tables, Diagrams

Summary

Negotiation Skills of Security Staff

I. Introduction

II. Background to the Problem

A. Security staff duties

B. Hiring of Security staff

C. Clients and general public

III. Major areas of Negotiation for Security Staff

A. Academic Staff

1. Access to own areas

2. Access to restricted areas

B. Students and Visitors

1. Noise

2. Property damage

3. Access to restricted areas

C. Major Problem behaviour

1. Forgetfulness

2. Drunkenness

3. Unreasonableness

4. Arrogance

D. Desired Security image

1. Reasonable

2. Polite

3. Efficient

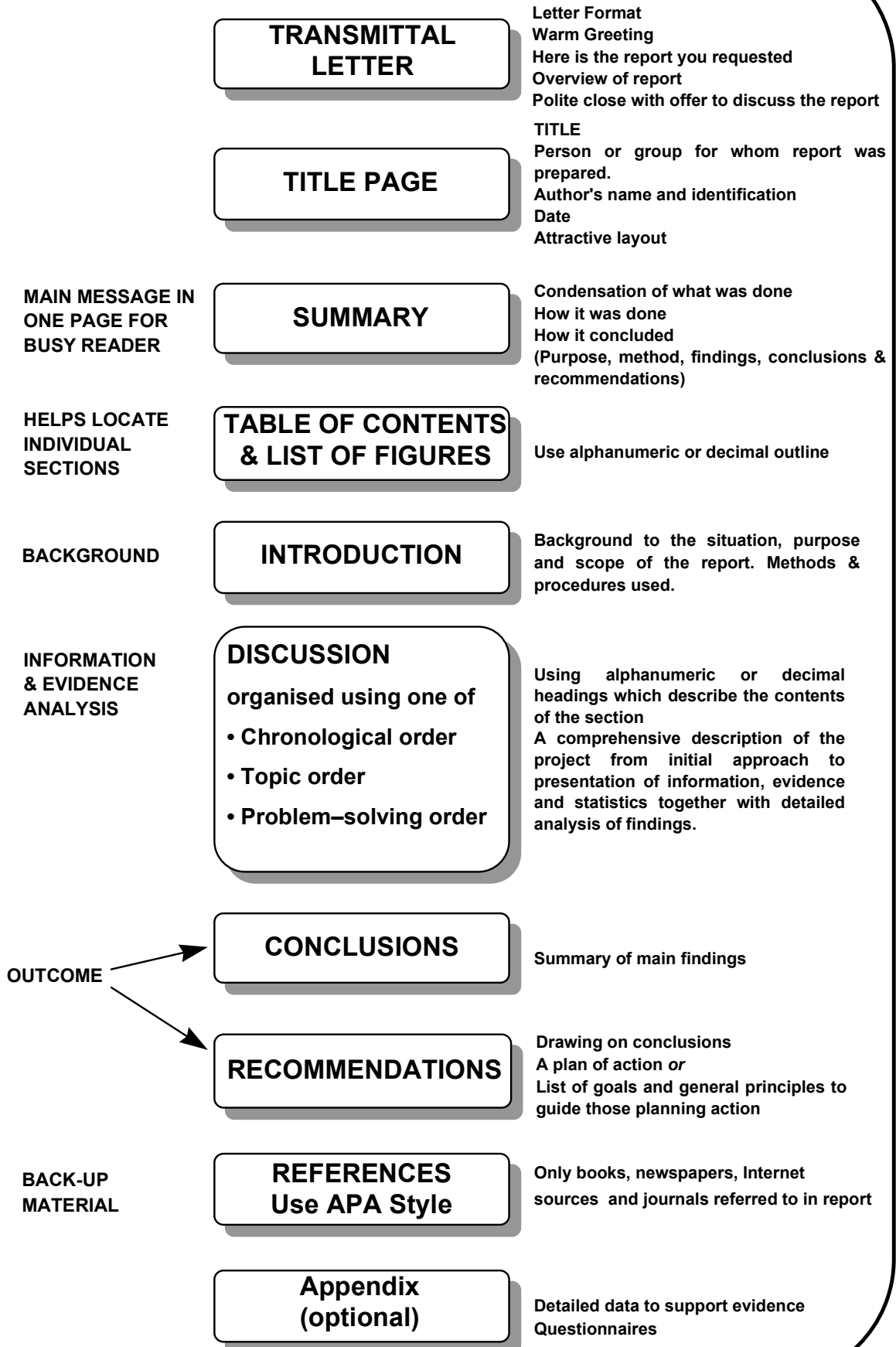
IV. Appropriate Negotiation Skills and Training Activities

V. Recommendations

VI. References

VII. Appendixes

ANATOMY OF A REPORT



Sample Assessment Tasks for Group Reports

The aim of this assignment is to enhance speaking and writing skills and to allow you to demonstrate your ability to:

- research a topic
 - produce a professional report
 - work as part of a presentation team
 - share ideas with students from backgrounds different from your own and distribute effort in the production and presentation of a report.
- a. Combine into groups of three students to research material (details follow) on a choice of topics.
 - b. In keeping with business and consulting practice present the main findings of the reports to the fellow students in your tutorial in a 12 minute presentation. Allocate members to cover aspects of the topic to be researched and presented. Presenters make a good impression if they are appropriately attired.
 - c. Report length 1200 words. This is an exercise in writing concisely about complex topics.
 - d. Attach a 250 word account of the dynamics of the group showing how your group solved any interpersonal and intercultural problems which arose. In the critique use material on group dynamics in your text to analyse your performance as a group. Students sometimes complain that one person has done all the work in the group. Identify precisely which parts of the assignment were done by each member of the group. Look for strategies you can use to avoid both domination and low levels of contribution. Avoid one group member doing all the writing.

Research

You should consult general texts, interview relevant people and use the CD-ROM and print indices to discover relevant research which will support your claims or arguments.

Topic 1

You have been commissioned by a business or law firm or a government department to write a report on the use of interpersonal communication skills within that organisation. (You might decide to emphasise useful listening behaviours, non-verbal communication, conflict resolution and negotiation skills, development of interaction pathways across hierarchies, gender relations or any other interpersonal topic approved by your tutor.)

Topic 2

You are a research consulting firm engaged to write a report on child care in a specified area. It would be an area of the Gold Coast, Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne or some other Australian city. Facts must be detailed, specific and accurate.

Your clients are a couple with three children aged 3 months, 3 years and 6 years. The husband is a federal politician and is often interstate and overseas, sometimes for extended periods. The wife wants to return to her work as a constitutional lawyer on a full time basis which would require starting sometimes at 7 am and working through to midnight. She will return to work as soon as she and her husband are satisfied that their children will receive optimum care. They have no family members living locally.

It is your task to write a report which will clearly set out the options available, the relative costs and the research which supports each option in providing the best care for each of the children.

Such research will require information about the facilities available, staff ratios for children, the desirability of children being segregated by age, emotional attachment and other issues. You are encouraged to begin your research early and to avoid inconveniencing local child care providers by too frequent requests to visit their facilities.

Try to conduct your practical research in areas most distant from the university as people in the local area can become tired of answering students' questions.

Among the options generally available are full time commercial day care in a purpose-built facility with trained staff, family day care under the supervision of a community group such as a university or

a church and private arrangements with child carers who operate from home or a private nanny. There may be other options available.

You will need to weigh up the various general claims made by proponents of each of these options and then investigate the specific qualifications of staff, facilities available and relative costs of each.

Your clients are sophisticated, business-oriented people who are paying for precise information succinctly presented. Your firm is keen to demonstrate to these clients that you are capable, professional information researchers able to make clear recommendations well supported with evidence.

Topic 3

You are a research consulting firm engaged to write a report on care for the aged or infirm people in a specified area. It would be an area of the Gold Coast, Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne, or some other Australian city. Facts must be detailed, specific and accurate.

Your clients are a couple with five children in their twenties. The husband is an engineer and is often interstate and overseas, sometimes for extended periods. The wife wants to return to her work as a Public Relations & Marketing Manager for a multinational company on a full time basis which would require starting sometimes at 7 am and working through to midnight. She will return to work as soon as she and her husband are satisfied that their parents will receive optimum care. They have no family members living locally.

The old people in the family needing care are Lucas, the 95 year old paternal grandfather who is crippled with arthritis and occasionally incontinent, and Diana, the maternal grandmother who is an active 69 year old who has intermittent bouts of Alzheimer's disease.

It is your task as a group to write a report which will clearly set out the options available, the relative costs and the research which supports each option in providing the best care for each of the elderly people.

Such research will require information about the facilities available, staff ratios for residents, costs and other issues. You are encouraged to begin your research early and to avoid inconveniencing local care providers by too frequent requests to visit their facilities.

Try to conduct your practical research in areas most distant from the university.

Consider all available options.

You will need to weigh up the various/general claims made by proponents of each of these options and then investigate the specific qualifications of staff, facilities available and relative costs of each.

Your clients are sophisticated, business oriented people who are paying for precise information succinctly presented. Your firm is keen to demonstrate to these clients that you are capable, professional information researchers able to make clear recommendations well supported with evidence.

Topic 4

You are a research consulting team engaged by a political party to provide Members of Parliament with a report on the issue of Road Safety and Accident Prevention for drivers aged between 18 and 28. Your clients would like to have reliable supporting statistics at their fingertips to support their general understanding that road accidents are a major cause of death for this age group and are also responsible for serious and maiming injuries to those who survive them. Costs to the community in loss of life and talents, in medical expenses and in damage to property are high. A solution is eagerly sought.

Your clients want a clear presentation of the facts against which they can assess any options which your report or any other source might present to them. Some areas which would need to be explored would be the effect of driver variables such as age, sex, personality, length and kind of driving tuition, driving experience, fatigue, alcohol or drug consumption, as well as other variables like age and

condition of vehicle and tyres, the time of day or night, the effect of weather and road conditions and the effect of the presence or absence of passengers or the number and visibility of police highway patrols.

Your research should investigate statistics on differential accident rates for men and women and for urban and rural young drivers. You should investigate claims that some individuals are “accident prone” and ought not to be issued a licence to drive once they have been so diagnosed. Your research could provide evidence that it is persons over the age of 28 who are more involved in accidents and for whom training courses should be devised to help them compensate for the increase in their reaction times. At all times it will be necessary to provide evidence to support your claims.

The recommendations that you devise need to be directed to areas such as publicity, attitude formation, practical driving skills education, road conditions, and to legal solutions such as limited licences, speed regulations and restrictions on alcohol consumption, as well as any other areas which your report covers.

Your clients are intelligent people who are paying you for your ability to use your finely honed research skills to present precise information succinctly and for your ability to recommend actions which meet the needs which your research reveals.

Topic 5

Your specialist communication firm has landed the commission to present a report to the Minister for Health on the best way to present an anti-smoking campaign or a campaign to urge people to immunise their children to the public. As part of your brief you have been asked to evaluate the effectiveness of “scare” campaigns compared with campaigns based on reason.

Topic 6

You are a research consulting team engaged by The Australian Council for Rehabilitation or the Disabled (ACROD) to provide a report on facilities and/or services available for people with disabilities in your city. You may want to limit your report to services for people with a defined disability such as a physical handicap or intellectual impairment.

Your report should identify any groups or individuals not covered by present facilities and/or services.

Your conclusion should identify areas in need of improvement or reduction of services or facilities.

Topic 7

You are a lawyer who is consulted by a couple whom you helped in the purchase of their house and in the setting up of their business. They have been experiencing “marriage difficulties” which they have diagnosed as “communication problems”. Business is slow on the Gold Coast and you are trying to keep yourself and your staff busy producing investigative reports on various topics for clients. They ask you to provide them with a report on the services they could utilise on the Gold Coast (or in some other area in Australia) to help them improve their communication skills within their marriage.

Your clients are sophisticated, business oriented people who are paying for precise information succinctly presented. Your firm is keen to demonstrate to these clients that you are capable, professional information researchers able to make clear recommendations well supported with evidence.

Writing exercise

Read the section on groups on p. 106 and write a paragraph using the template on p. 69 beginning “To work well and productively in a group I will need to ...”

Team tasks

In groups of three. Gather a group of reports available from your library. Include annual reports, financial reports and reports of committees investigating public policy issues. Analyse the methods these reports use to present material. Rank the stack of reports in terms of their readability.

Define readability as you have used the term in action by making a list of the qualities that make a report readable.

Share your list with the larger group by putting it up on the whiteboard.

Discussion exercise

As a group discuss the list of qualities that make a report readable.

Writing tasks

Convert a report you have written into a speech outline.

Write a paragraph on “Working with a group” using the format on p. 69 to create a report – allocating the tasks.

Speech opportunities

In groups of three present the findings of a report you have written to the class. Dress as you would for a formal business presentation and make use of visual aids.