

Writing reports

Reports are an important management tool for influencing future actions. Through reports, information can be shared and consequently lessons learned.

However, if a report is not easy to read, it will probably not be read at all. Good report writing takes time and preparation.

Follow the guidelines below and improve the quality of your reports.

PURPOSE

What do you want your document to do? Is it to **inform** (progress report), **instruct** (setting out guidelines) or **persuade** (lessons learned)?

SUBJECT

What kind of information needs to be in the report – e.g. results and achievements; activities implemented; money spent,?

READERS

Who will the readers of the report be? How much information do they need? What do they already know?

- In a progress report with the purpose to keep readers informed, only the latest information is needed.
- Presenting a project to a potential donor, you will need to explain more.

The target group will also determine the level of language you need to use (e.g. technical terms, jargon), and whether translated versions are needed.

STRUCTURE

Is there a standard layout and headings? Following a standard layout can save time, and allow comparison between reports over time. Generally you need to have:

- **Introduction:** what the report is about; which topics are included, which are not and why; how the information was obtained; why the report was written; the aims of the report.
- **Clarification of the problem:** explain what the problem is, why the problem needs to be addressed, and what information is needed in addressing it.
- **Methodology:** a short description of how the information was obtained, the results and interpretation of the information obtained.
- **Conclusions of the results;** summary of the key issues.
- **Recommendations;** what actions should be taken as a result of the findings.
- **Annexes** – useful for detailed explanations, examples, literature list etc.

LENGTH

Is there a maximum number of pages expected? Long reports need an Executive Summary at the beginning capturing the key points.

TIMING

Agree when the report needs to be ready, and plan time to write first draft, have it checked and revised. Agree the frequency of regular progress reports.

Writing the report

- *collect the information needed*

- *arrange information in a logical way and ensure the structure is well balanced*

- *write in the language of your reader, clarifying jargon etc.*

- *make it easy to read: short sentences, and short paragraphs are better*

- *use charts and diagrams where possible: graphics can make the point in a quicker, more striking manner.*

- *organise the layout with space between the lines and paragraphs, and clear headings*

- *proof-read the report for spelling, grammar and presentation mistakes*

- *ask someone else to read it and give you feedback before sending*

Key findings need to be clear, easy to read and easy to find

Finally check:

- *does it answer the questions?*

- *is it logical?*

- *are the pages numbered?*

Adapted from Guidelines for Writing Reports, Lia van Ginneken

All In Diary CD Resources:

© Multi-media publishing, (1975) Report Writing – a Take Away Guide,

Web links for further information

<http://www.networklearning.org/writing-reports.html>