

A GUIDE TO REPORT WRITING UNIT 5B

Note – see Researching Global Futures – a guide for students. Teachers Guide Updated 2003 149-154

1 What is a report

A report is the conventional method of presenting precise information. A report may be used to convey an assessment of any situation or the results from qualitative and/or quantitative data analysis. A report has clearly stated aims. It is tightly focused on the subject of investigation. A really effective report will also be compelling and stimulating to read.

2 Producing a report

To help you to produce a report, four stages in the process have been identified for you to follow. This may help you to tackle key issues and understand the task set.

These four stages are:

- (a) preparation
- (b) planning
- (c) writing
- (d) pre-submission editing.

(a) Preparation

The first stage is to make a choice from the list of titles – in particular do you want to do some primary research? Choose a title which you are interested in.

The time spent at this stage of producing the report is vital. Careful preparation is an investment. It allows you to make the best use of the time available. During this period you should decide WHAT you are writing and WHY, before resolving HOW to write your report.

Establish the broad focus of your report first with reference to the specification and the assessment objectives and then with reference to the generalisation. Undertake some individual background reading using the suggested bibliography. Use a search engine to look for more possibilities. This enables you to define the subject and your aims more precisely. If you are going to do some primary data collection it is best to make your appointments for people you need to see, and do an initial survey at this stage.

When you have completed your reading and feasibility study, review the key issues and research methods that will be used within your report. Make a note of them.

(b) Planning

Planning is essential. It saves time and promotes clarity in collecting the information you require, in organising the material and in writing the report.

You will find it easier if you break the whole process down into a number of distinct tasks:

- (a) data collection and analysis can be broken down either according to the source or the subsection of the report;
- (b) similarly, the writing process can be broken down – the writing of text into subsections, and presentation into graphs, tables and maps.

You will also be faced with a number of questions:

- (a) what evidence is needed to meet the overall objective of the report?
- (b) where is that evidence?
- (c) how much evidence should be collected?
- (d) how should the evidence be analysed?
- (e) how should the evidence and the analysis be ordered for writing the report?

Attempting to deal with all of these factors in a chaotic way leads to confusion and wasted effort. Therefore, after “preparation” you should begin to plan the data collection, analysis and writing process. Good organisation is the key to success.

Using the following sequence may help you to plan and to determine the method for writing your report:

- (a) identify the sources of evidence (data and/or literature), look for a range of views on the issue;
 - (b) decide what is the most appropriate and relevant evidence to collect.
Be precise in this, understand the evidence;
 - (c) decide how you will present your findings including the order in which they will be used to create a structure to the report – the plan;
 - (d) identify likely figures – maps, tables, diagrams, and think how you can use them;
 - (e) decide on the order of priority of each of the tasks;
 - (f) draw up a realistic timetable for the completion of each task, including writing the draft of the report.
- (c) **The writing process**

There are three main factors to consider at this stage to give your report a sound framework, clear style and an attractive appearance:

- structure
- language
- presentation

- **Structure**

You need to give form and shape to your report. A basic structure helps the reader digest the report. It also helps you to write and organise your material logically.

A structure implied the assessment criteria, but your report should have the following:

- (a) report cover sheet, title page and contents;
 - (b) executive summary/abstract; [on front cover]
 - (c) introduction and definition of the question or issue;
 - (d) sources of research information used, methods of collection and analysis and their limitations;
 - (e) analysis and interpretation;
 - (f) evaluation and conclusion;
 - (g) bibliography and appendices.
- The main body

First, concentrate on writing the body of the report. This is the introduction, the findings, and the conclusions. Then deal with the other sections.

The following order for writing is suggested.

- (a) Analysis and interpretation. This is the section in which you present your findings. When you are writing this section, all of your material should have been sorted, selected and arranged in note form. This

The bulk of the report 800-1000 words.

section includes:

- (i) the results of your analysis;
- (ii) your interpretation of those results.

This section forms the basis for your conclusions. You should help the reader by ending each separate section with its own conclusion.

(b) Methods. In this section you should discuss:

Just a couple of sentences here – perhaps 100 words. Full details could be in an appendix.

- (i) the sources of evidence you have used and their possible bias;
- (ii) how you have collected and analysed the evidence;
- (iii) the limitations of the sources and methods of collection and analysis.

(c) Conclusions. This section is a summary of all the major findings

Vital, but still only around 200 words available.

made at stages throughout the report. No new evidence should appear here. The conclusion consider the evidence presented in the main body, draws out the implications and brings it to one overall conclusion or an ordered series of final conclusions.

(d) Introduction. After having written your findings and conclusions you

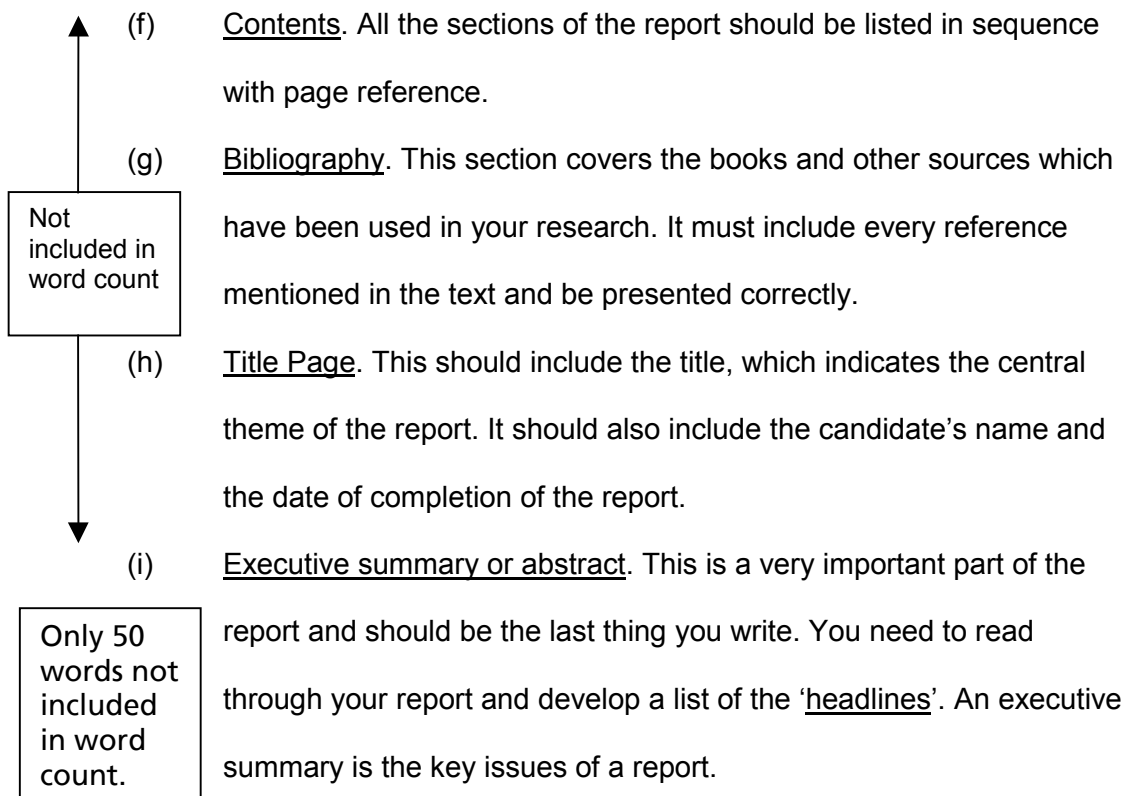
Only 100 – 150 words affordable.

now know clearly what you want to introduce. The introduction is where you acquaint the reader with the purpose of the report and guide them through the structure of your report.

(e) Appendices. This section is set aside for supplementary evidence not

Not included in word count.

essential to the main findings, but which provides useful back-up support for your main arguments e.g. a transcript of an interview or analysis of a complex set of statistics.



- **Language**

First impressions count. It is unwise to put the reader off before they have even studied the report. There are also 10 marks out of 60 for the quality of written communication.

You are solely responsible for what you write and the worlds you choose to express your thoughts. Remember that although you may have an individual "style" of expression, this does not excuse poor English. Your style will not necessarily be immediately apparent to the reader, but poorly expressed English will be. Your sentences must be grammatically correct, well punctuated and words must be spelt accurately, especially geographical terminology.

Poor writing regularly indicates muddled ideas. You do not really know what you are saying until you put it into words that another person can easily understand.

Remember you are writing to communicate not to perplex or impress. Avoid jargon.

Focus on the specific purpose of the report. Every part of the report should relate to it and this will help to keep the report concise and coherent. You will have to do this anyway to keep within the 1500 words. Remember well produced maps and diagrams can save many words. Tables too are not part of the word count.

Accuracy is vitally important so always be precise. Ensure that you are using the correct words. Clarity is essential. Do not write phrases or sentences that may have more than one meaning. To avoid this you must know precisely what you want to say. Know the material you are trying to convey.

Other important things to remember:

- (a) Keep sentences short and simple. Long complex sentences slow the reader down and confuse and impede understanding. The same applies to paragraph.
- (b) Poor spelling automatically detracts from your work and will annoy the reader. Use a dictionary and you can also check the final document using the spell checker on a PC. (Remember, however, that this may well use American spellings and its dictionary may not include all the words you use in the report.)

- **Presentation**

Your report must look good in addition to reading well. Adequate headings and numbering make it easier for the reader to comprehend what you are saying. This stage of report writing requires the same level of care that went into composing the text. Do not be afraid to use bullet points to present arguments.

The presentation of statistics is often more informative and eye-catching if they are shown visually, for example by using graphs, pie charts or histograms.

Layout is important. This is the relationship between print and space on the page. This applies whether it is hand-written or work processed. A crowded page with dense blocks of print or writing and little space looks unattractive and is off-putting. Always ensure that there are:

- (a) adequate margins;
- (b) either double or 1.5 spaced lines;
- (c) headings that stand out clearly from the page.
- (d) font size of 12 or more.

(d) Pre-submission editing

It is important not only to read the draft through from start to finish before submission, but also to edit and refine the report. It is so easy when word processing. You will have to refine the report in order to meet the 1500 word limit requirements.

As you read, mark pages which will need attention later. Do not stop to deal with them now. You need to get a feel of the overall structure and impact of the report first so your initial read through must be continuous. Put yourself in the reader's shoes and be highly critical of what you have written.

Proof-reading is vitally important. Regardless of the time and effort put into writing the report, the required result will not be achieved without sufficient care being devoted to proof-reading. A poorly typed report, full of errors and inconsistencies in layout, has a damaging effect regardless of the quality of the content.

- (a) The report must be checked in great detail, for grammar and spelling errors.
- (b) Ask yourself whether you could have expressed yourself in a better way. If so, change the sentence or the paragraph.
- (c) Assess whether the structure of the main body of work is really the most suitable one to present your material, ideas and arguments.
- (d) Is each paragraph structured well? Make sure every idea or piece of information has a separate paragraph.
- (e) Are all the maps and diagrams included in the correct place and integrated into the text (as figures)?
- (f) Are all the references in the text included in the bibliography with full formal details?
- (g) Does the report fulfil the stated aims and assessment objectives?
- (h) Is your argument watertight and easy to follow?
- (i) Does your conclusion make your argument all the more convincing?

- (j) Does your executive summary/abstract convey the key points of the report?
- (j) Finally, assess the layout and general appearance of the document.

3 Submission

The report is finished. You can submit it in the confidence that it is well done and carried out to the very best of your ability.

Note that you can transfer your marks from January to June in each cycle or you can resubmit an improved report once. In both cases it will be reassessed. Note that you have also to resit the other part of Global Futures – an exam essay on a physical option at the same time.