How to write a good report

Follow this opening with an introduction to the situation which provides background information and states how the report will unfold. The background information should answer the readers' questions about the circumstances such as who? why? where? and when? The introduction should begin to establish the author's validity. Statements which outline the problem, the purpose and the scope of the report will provide focus for the reader and outline the objectives of the report.

The next section, the discussion, should provide support with facts and events which give full details of what happened and how. Present the information logically and as concisely as possible.

In the conclusions, provide the reader with the outcome; the effect the situation is having or will have. The reader should be able to clearly see the logic used in making these conclusions from information presented in the previous sections.

Then state your recommendations based on your conclusions. The recommendations should be predictable and logical; not a surprise to the reader. This last section will sum up the main findings and what action needs to be taken.

Attachments which support your findings and are referred to in the report should be included with the report properly labelled. A title page and, for lengthy reports, a table of contents, list of tables and figures, a descriptive synopsis or informative synopsis could also be included. The descriptive synopsis should tell the reader what the report does while the informative synopsis should tell what the report says. An executive summary may be placed at the beginning to precisely detail the conclusions at a glance. Appendices, references, bibliography and indices should also be included if appropriate.

Know Your Reader

One way to ensure that your report will be read is to know to whom you are writing, and write accordingly. To motivate a reader to read and act on your report, you must target it to the people you want to read it and appeal to their logic, emotions and character. Consider their role in the organization, their daily concerns and attitudes, previous knowledge of your topic, what they will need from your report, how your report could affect their role and any personal characteristics such as age, attitudes or pet peeves that could influence their reactions. For example, if you are writing about a technical subject to someone who is not familiar with the topic, don't use technical terminology (jargon) to impress the reader. If the reader doesn't understand it, the report won't be read and the desired support or action will not be achieved.

On the other hand, not using enough technical terminology could be considered condescending or patronizing by a reader who is familiar with the subject and, again, the report will not be read or acted upon.

Design for Readability

The design or format can determine the readability of the report. The reader must be led logically through the report. "Daisy-chaining" your ideas together to integrate the different sections will help keep the reader's attention. This can be done by the use of descriptive headings and the choice of words and phrases used to proceed from one point to the next. Descriptive headings will help to tie sections together and grab the reader's interest. Don't waste these opportunities on non-descriptive words such as "Background" or "Introduction" if there is a possibility the reader might not be interested in your report. Use meaningful, attention-grabbing headings which describe what the next section contains to keep the reader's interest.

The beginning and end of the report are the places that will receive the most attention. Put your most important statements in these spots. For example, the statement of purpose in a position of importance near the beginning of the report provides direction to the reader. Information can be de-emphasized by placing it in the centre or body of the report. The beginning and end of sentences and paragraphs are also key places to use important words or sentences.

Other tips to remember are to make sure the document is no longer than it needs to be, and that graphics such as pictures, graphs and charts are included only where they serve to explain or emphasize information and are referred to in the text. If your report is likely to end up in a stack on someone's desk, waiting to be read, try putting it in an attractive, eye-catching cover (perhaps in the reader's favorite color) which will encourage the reader to pick up your's first.

By arranging the report logically, taking your reader into account, using the most effective format for your type of report, and ensuring it is no longer than necessary, your report will have achieved readability and will be on its way to success.