Reports

What is a report?

The purpose of a report is usually to investigate an issue and 'report back' findings which allow people to make decisions or take action. Depending on your course, a report may require you to record, to inform, to instruct, to analyse, to persuade, or to make specific recommendations. Look for these or other key words in your assessment task.

To prepare a report, you will usually need to:

- *gather* information on the issue

- *analyse* and *interpret* that information

- organise your analysis into key *findings* or *observations*

- *recommend* actions that address your findings or discuss their implications

Reports are distinct from other forms of writing, such as essays. The table below shows the main differences.

Table 1: Differences between essays and reports. Adapted from University of Canberra (2014).

Essays	**Reports**	What does this mean?
Essays will be read carefully from beginning to end	**Reports will be scanned as readers search for the pieces of information they need, however your assignment will be read in detail**	• Use a summary at the beginning that covers all the key content • Organise the information using a logical structure • Use headings and sub-headings to help readers locate information • Use clear and concise paragraphs throughout, and dot-points where applicable • Consider whether tables or graphs could be used to visually summarise information
Essays discuss perspectives on an issue, and usually mount a clear argument or adopt a point of view	**Reports collate, analyse and interpret information related to a topic and organise it into findings and observations**	
Essays develop a single line of discussion, linking ideas together into a cohesive series of paragraphs	**Reports contain 'chunks' of information, addressing key aspects or themes within the topic**	
Essays end with a conclusion and sometimes predictions or suggestions for further research	**Reports end with a summary of the key findings, and recommendations for actions that will address the main issues raised in the report**	

What does a report look like?

The table below outlines the sections of a typical report. Sometimes, reports are also submitted with a 'Letter of Transmittal', which officially announces the delivery of the report and briefly summarises the reason for the report and the main findings and recommendations.

Table 2: Sections of a typical report

| Preliminary pages Numbered with roman numerals (i, ii, iii, etc.)	Title page	- Name of University, course name and code, title of report, author's name, student ID, name of tutor/lecturer/supervisor, date of submission
	Abstract, Summary, or Executive Summary	- Overview/synopsis of the whole report - All the main issues, findings and recommendations, in brief
	Acknowledgements	Any assistance, editing or work carried out by another person or organisation
	Table of Contents	Heading is 'Contents' - Include all major section/sub-section headings, worded and numbered exactly as in the report - Include page numbers for each section/sub-section
	List of figures	Necessary if more than a few figures appear in report
	List of tables	Necessary if more than a few tables appear in report
	Symbols	Where symbols are used extensively, include a list

Body of report
 	
Numbered logically and consistently
 	
For example:
1.0 Introduction
  1.1 Background
  1.2 Objectives
2.0
  2.1
  2.2
3.0
  3.1
  3.2
etc.
	Introduction	Explains the context of the report for the reader and orients them to the document's content
		- Reason for the report (who or what prompted the investigation)
		- Purpose and objectives
		- Review of relevant previous work/research and its relationship to the project
		- Methods of investigation/approach
		- Scope and limitations – what issues are covered, and what issues are not covered and why
		- Outline of the structure of report

	Main sections	Organised under appropriate headings and sub-headings Figures, tables, diagrams, maps etc. to be numbered and labelled (These must be referred to in the body of the report)
	Conclusion	Clear and concise summary of main points - Context and significance of the information - Reference to the original aims/purpose of report - Application of results - Limitations and advantages of findings - The writer's judgement/evaluation
	Recommendations	Emerge from the conclusions May include a brief, persuasive statement before the list of recommendations
Supplementary sections	References	A reference list (not a bibliography) of all sources that have been referred to in the report Heading of this page is 'References' List according to the required referencing system (e.g. list in alphabetical order when using UniSA Harvard)
	Appendices	Material which is incidental to the report or supportive of the report, but too long to include in the body (e.g. maps, letters, questionnaires) Each separate appendix should be lettered (e.g. Appendix A, etc.) Page numbering can continue into the Appendices

How is a report prepared?

Start by clarifying your purpose. Underline or highlight any key words in the task instructions and ask yourself the following questions:

- What problem or question prompted the report?

- Who is the audience for the report, and what do they want to know?

- What is the scope and are there limitations, i.e. what issues are covered, what issues aren't?

- Has any relevant previous work/research been conducted on this topic? If so, what did it find?

- What methods or approach should be used?

This information should help you identify the focus of your research and investigation. It also provides most of the information needed in a report's introduction (see page 2). So consider drafting your introduction first to help you get clear and focussed.

Even though reports contain many different sections, the body is the most important part. It's where you methodically outline your investigation, analysis and interpretations, which then form the basis for any recommendations you make. While your lecturer may offer guidelines about how to group information in the body (i.e. what headings to use), they will usually leave this decision up to you. You could divide the body into some predetermined categories (e.g. the different aspects of the problem you analysed) or organise information according to themes that emerged during your research. The goal should be to organise and present information in ways that best help the reader understand the issue your report covers, and lead to findings that clearly connect to and address the issue.

Once you've written the introduction and body, the remaining sections can be drafted. Begin with the conclusion and recommendations and then work through the other preliminary and supplementary pages.
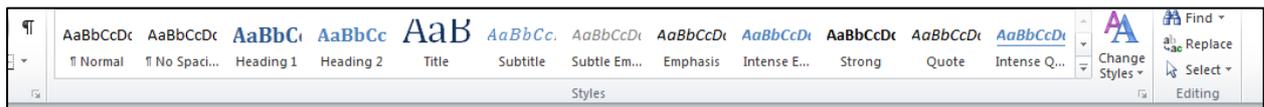
Using the 'style' functions in MS Word (see above) to set all your headings, subheadings and labels for tables, graphs and figures will keep your formatting consistent. In addition, you will be able to automatically generate a Table of Contents when you are finished.

References

University of Canberra 2014, *What are the differences between essays and reports?*, Academic Skills Centre, viewed 18 December 2014, <http://learnonline.canberra.edu.au/mod/book/view.php?id=180631&chapterid=332>.

(Note: this referenced document is now only accessible to staff and students of the University of Canberra but it was used as a source in preparing content for this guide.)