WRITING THE RESEARCH REPORT

This section is about **report writing** and deals with **gathering** and **researching** information and how you **present** this information to the reader.

- A report is a working document. It has a definite purpose to:
  - **inform** the reader about an area of research
  - **record** the procedures and findings of experiments or investigations
  - **detail** methods of problem solving.

Reports have a formal and visible structure. Reports are divided into sections and subsections with numbered headings. The visible structure serves a purpose because parts of a report are often read without reading the whole report. Visual presentation with indenting and boldfacing is important in a report.

A report, then, is a **professional document** written with a **purpose** and with **specific** readers in mind. When you write a report you need to think about the **reader** and how to present the information in a way that is **clearly accessible** to the reader. The structure of the report is designed to guide the reader through the report and make it easier to gain an overview of the subject or locate particular information easily and efficiently.

STRUCTURE AND LAYOUT OF REPORTS

A typical report layout consists of the sections described below.

**Description of Preliminary Sections of the Report**

In the Preliminary section you identify the subject and author of the report and give details about the content and a summary of the contents.

- **Title Page**
  - The title page contains the following information:
    - name of the university
    - informative title for the content
    - name(s) and ID numbers of the writer(s)
    - subject code and subject name
    - lecturer’s name
    - date of submittal.
• The title page should be attractively presented.

**Acknowledgments (optional)**
The acknowledgments section gives you the opportunity to thank people who helped you with your research. Each acknowledgment should give:

• the name of the person
• their organization
• the reason for the acknowledgment.

Do not acknowledge people whose job it is to help you, e.g. your lecturer. Write a separate paragraph for each acknowledgment. **It is generally not necessary to include this section in a first year report.**

**Summary (sometimes called an Abstract or Synopsis)**
The summary of the report is designed to be read by people who will not have time to read the whole report. Use your summarising skills to give a clear but brief account of:

• the purpose and scope of the report
• the methods used to research the issue
• the main issues/arguments raised
• the main findings or conclusions.

The summary should be about **one-tenth of the word limit** in length. Although it goes at the front of your report you write it after you have **finished the report** because the summary summarises the report. The summary is a mini report in itself. Students often have problems writing the summary because its content resembles much of what they have already written in the Introduction and Conclusion to the report. But this information needs to be repeated, in a condensed form, because, for some readers, the summary is the only section of the report they will read. **Do not use internal referencing in your summary.**

**The Table of Contents**
The Table of Contents page shows the reader what topics are covered in the report and where to find them. The Table of Contents must list every major section in the report and every sub-section. These should be clearly numbered using the decimal numbering system. The Table of Contents should include:

• major headings and sub-headings listed exactly as in report
• decimal numbering of sections/sub-sections
• Introduction is Section 1.0
• page numbering
• preliminary pages in lower case roman numerals (ii, iii)
• main and final pages in Arabic numerals (1, 2).
A report can have several orders of headings - the main heading, subheadings and third order headings. Use the features on your word processor (font, print size, bolding, indenting etc.) to distinguish between the headings and present an attractive layout for your Table of Contents page. Note that the most important heading should be the most dominant, with the other headings decreasing in prominence according to their diminishing order. (Refer to Page 33 for a sample Table of Contents).

**List of Illustrations (optional)**
It is unlikely that a first year report will contain a List of Illustrations but it is useful to know how to construct one. If your report contains many graphic illustrations such as:

- **Figures** (graphs, diagrams, line drawings, photographs) or
- **Tables** (statistical information),

then it is necessary to provide in detail, after the Table of Contents, a List of Figures followed by a List of Tables. You should:

- place the List of Tables and List of Figures on a separate page after the Table of Contents
- provide the number, title and page for each illustration
- make sure each illustration is correctly captioned in the text of your report.

Refer to Page 25 for more details on illustrations in your report. Consult with your lecturer on the necessity to include a List of Tables or a List of Figures.

**Glossary of Terms (optional)**
In this section you define any terms, symbols or abbreviations you use in your report that the reader is unlikely to understand.

Simply list the term or abbreviation and give a concise explanation alongside. **Consult with your lecturer on the necessity to include a glossary.**

**Description of the Main Sections of the Report**
In the main part of your report you discuss your research investigation, present your findings in a coherent form and come to a clear and unbiased conclusion. The main section starts with the Introduction.

**Introduction**
The Introduction tells the reader what the report is about and explains how the report is structured. It should contain the following information:

- **The statement of purpose** (what the report is about)
- **Background information** relevant to the topic
- **The scope** (the outline of what is covered in the report)
- **The limitations** (what is not included if this is significant)
- **The sources of information** (other than library references).
How you write the introduction and, in particular, how much emphasis you give to the points listed above will depend on the nature of your topic. At first year your introduction to a research report is likely to be quite straightforward. In the later years of your course your research topic may be quite demanding, and you may need to give considerable thought to writing the introduction so as to make your topic clear to the reader.

**Body of the Report.**

The body of the report includes all the information about your research topic, the facts, opinions and findings. This information needs to be organised by you into sections and sub-sections. It is the organisation of the research information into a **logical sequence** that represents the creative effort of report writing.

It is your job (rather like a newspaper sub-editor) to come up with headings for your report sections. Writing section and sub-section headings for the body of the report is quite difficult. Headings must be concise, relevant and grammatically correct.

How you organise and write this section will depend on your topic but your main purpose is to keep your reader in mind and present your research findings in a way that is easy for your reader to understand.

*NOTE:* The **body of the report** is just a term used to describe the main sections of the report (in the same way we refer to the body of an essay). You must NOT use this term as a heading in your report or Table of Contents!

**Conclusion/s**

This is the final section in the main part of your report. In your conclusion you refer back to the purpose of your report and summarise your research findings. What did you find out from your reading and research? You may come to one general conclusion or you may make a number of concluding statements depending on the nature of your topic. Your conclusion is based on your research findings as detailed in the previous sections so do not introduce any new information into this section.

Generally in a first year research report you are not asked to make any specific recommendations. If you do have some recommendations then you can include them in this section.

**Description of the Final Sections of the Report**

The final sections contain the documented evidence to support your research investigation plus any additional supporting evidence.

**Reference List**

This is a list of all the sources you have cited in the text of your report. It must contain full bibliographic details of each source. Each source should be listed in alphabetical order by author surname.
Refer to Section 8: Referencing, for information on how to cite references in the text of your report and how to compile a Reference List.

**Appendices (optional)**

An appendix (plural appendices) should contain any additional information which is relevant to the report but is too cumbersome to put in the main sections.

Items which might be put into an appendix include:

- questionnaires/surveys
- copies of letters
- complex statistics
- detailed data/descriptions
- maps/charts
- design documentation
- log books.

Each appendix must be referred to at the relevant point in the body of the report, *e.g. the full list of survey questions will be found in Appendix A.* However readers should not be repeatedly asked to refer to the appendices. It is very irritating when reading a report to be continually referred to detailed information in the appendices. Detailed material should be summarised in the report and the full material included in an appendix for the specialist reader to consult.

Appendices are usually designated by letters rather than by numbers e.g. Appendix A, Appendix B. Each appendix should be given a separate line in the Table of Contents and should be given a title and a page number. A separate page must precede the first appendix and be titled, “Appendices”. Each subsequent appendix must also begin with a separate title page, giving appendix letter and title.

**ILLUSTRATIONS IN YOUR REPORT**

Most first year reports are short and include only a few graphic illustrations such as graphs, diagrams, line drawings, photographs or statistical tables. These illustrations should be placed in the report near to the relevant text but they must be clearly labelled as either Figures or Tables.

- **Figures** (graphs, diagrams, line drawings, photographs)
- **Tables** (statistical information).

Figures and Tables are treated as separate types of illustrations as follows.

- **Figures**: Each figure must be called a Figure and be given a number and an informative title. *e.g. Figure 1. Cross-section of clamp.* The first figure is
referred to as Figure 1, the next Figure 2 and so on. The title or caption is placed under the Figure.

- **Tables:** Each table of statistical data must be called a Table and be given a number and an informative title. *e.g. Table 1. Temperature patterns in Melbourne* The first table is referred to as Table 1, the second Table 2 and so on. The title or caption is placed above the Table.

Do not muddle up the numbering of Figures and Tables. They each have their own numbering series. Do not number Figures and Tables according to the section of the report in which they are placed.

In the text of your report refer the reader to the Figure or Table. *e.g. The G. Clamp is illustrated in Figure 2 below.*

There are two ways to put illustrations into your report. You can:

- leave a gap in your text, paste in the diagram and then photocopy the page, or
- use your computer and a software package to insert them digitally by storing the images in a file and then importing each one into the text.

**Referencing of Figures and Tables**

If you use figures and tables in your report which are taken from reference sources in your report then you must acknowledge this with internal referencing. You must tell the reader the source of the figures and tables.

The example given shows the correct way to label, title and reference a Figure. In the text you must refer the reader to the diagram. Look at the example.
Figure 1 below (*The Economist*, 11 April, 1998, p. 22) shows the valuation of Big Macs in Japan for 1989–98.

![Japanese Big Mac valuations](image)

Figure 1: Valuation of Big Macs in Yen, 1989-98, (*The Economist*, 11 April, 1998, p. 22).

**PRESENTATION OF REPORTS**

Your written report reflects your ability to fulfill the requirements of the assignment and submit a professional looking document to your lecturer. Your report should be set out in a format that is easy to read. It should:

- be **word processed** on A4 paper with font size about **12 point**
- have **clear margins** at the top and bottom of the page
- have **right** and **left** margins approximately 2.5-3.5cm wide
- have **spacing** between paragraphs
- be **securely bound** or fastened in a plastic file i.e. no loose papers slipped into a pocket type file or plastic sheets.

You must keep a copy of your report and be prepared to submit it immediately if your original is misplaced. It is a good idea to keep **two** copies of the file, in different places, in case one gets lost.

**EDITING AND PROOFREADING THE REPORT**

Use **spell check** and **grammar check** when you have finished word processing to correct obvious keyboard errors and spelling mistakes. Then print out your report for final editing and proofreading. Do not edit from the screen. Some students find **reading their report out aloud** helps them to pick up grammatical errors. If it does not sound right then check it.

**Edit your report for:**

- **structure** - organisation of content into logically sequenced paragraphs and sections
• clarity and accuracy of information - is it referenced correctly?

Proofread your report for:
• spelling mistakes and grammatical errors
• formatting - is report correctly presented according to report assignment requirements?
• document integrity - consistent decimal numbering, page numbering, referencing.

Report Checklist
Use this checklist to make sure you have fulfilled all the report writing requirements.

1. Report Format

   **Title Page**
   Name of university
   Report title (prominent)
   Name & ID of writer(s)
   Subject code & subject name
   Lecturer’s name
   Date of submittal

   **Summary**
   Purpose and scope
   Research methods
   Main issues/arguments
   Conclusions

   **Table of Contents**
   Headings listed exactly as in report
   Page numbers shown
   Decimal numbering of sections and sub-sections
   (Introduction is section 1.0.)

   **Introduction**
   Statement of purpose (what report is about)
   Background / explanatory information
   Scope (outline of what is in report)
   Limitations (what is not included)
   Sources of information (other than library references)

   **Body of Report**
   Developed logically
   Appropriate headings and sub-headings
   Internal referencing (Harvard system) to acknowledge sources
   Do NOT use BODY OF REPORT as a heading

   **Conclusion/s**
   Answers purpose as stated in Introduction
   Gives a summary of the findings of your research
   Provides concluding statement
   Does not add new information

   **Reference List**
   Correct use of Harvard system
   References listed in alphabetical order

   **Appendices (optional)**
   Referred to in text
   Designated by letters
   Separate title page titled “Appendices”
Each appendix must have an individual title page

2. Layout

*Headings*  
Distinguish between main & sub headings  
Consecutively numbered  
Avoid too many 3rd / 4th order headings  
Use decimal numbering system  
Appropriately indicate content of text

*Throughout Report*  
Break blocks of text into readable sections  
Emphasise text with *underlining*, **bolding** and use of white space

*Illustrations* (optional)  
Referred to in text  
Labelled as Figure / Table  
Given a number, a title and source

*Page Numbering*  
Count title page as page 'i' ‘but don’t print number on it  
Number all preliminary pages with lower case Roman numerals (ii, iii, iv)  
Number the first page of report (Introduction) and subsequent pages with Arabic numerals (1, 2, 3).

3. Language

Edit and proofread  
Check grammar, spelling, punctuation

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**Assessment Of Your Report**

Your report will be assessed in terms of your ability to fulfill the requirements of the report writing assignment, and to read and follow the instructions set out in this section. Your lecturer will assess your report under the following headings:

*Format and Layout*: the presentation of the report

*Content*: the scope of the research and organisation of the information

*Structure*: the introduction, conclusion, summary

*Referencing*: the accuracy of internal referencing and reference list

*Language*: spelling, grammar and attention to editing and proofreading.
Sample Report

VICTORIA UNIVERSITY

FIRST YEAR STUDENTS’ DISSATISFACTION WITH UNIVERSITY

Student: Joe Bloggs
ID: 720371
Subject: Engineering Communication/ACE 1500
Lecturer: Bruce Phillips
Date: 15 May, 2002
SUMMARY

A recent study by researchers at Melbourne and Monash universities has found that almost one quarter of school leavers were dissatisfied with university at the end of first semester.

Students generally felt that VCE did not prepare them for university studies. Students also felt that they were not equipped to make choices about prospective courses as they had not received adequate advice from their schools or from universities. There was also a suggestion that students were too immature at 17 or 18 to be expected to make decisions affecting their future.

Immaturity was also seen as a problem by some mature aged students who complained of poor attention and listening skills and general apathetic approach of first year school leavers.

Another contributing factor to students’ dissatisfaction was poor facilities and staffing at universities caused by inadequate government funding.

Does the Summary give: purpose, main issues, conclusions?

Does it contain all the information necessary in a summary?

Does it contain any unnecessary information?
TABLE OF CONTENTS

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3.0 IMMATURETY 2
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5.0 CONCLUSION 2
6.0 REFERENCES 3

Notes:

- List the Summary in the Table of Contents but place your summary after the title page and before the actual Table of Contents. This is a convention peculiar to report writing.
- You must not list the Table of Contents in the actual Table of Contents.
- Preliminary pages (title, summary) are numbered with Roman numerals.
- The title page is ‘i’ but do not put this on the title page itself.
- Start numbering with “ii” for summary.
- Introduction is page 1 (Arabic numerals).
- Do not start a separate page for each section.
- Main headings should be distinguishable from sub-headings.
- Design the Table of Contents so that it occupies at least half the page.
1.0 INTRODUCTION

For many students, university is the next logical step, after VCE, towards a professional career. Researchers from Melbourne and Monash universities surveyed first year students at seven Australian universities. They found that almost one-quarter of school leavers were unhappy with university after only one semester and that more than one-third of all school leavers think about deferring their studies (Richards, 1999, p. 2). The aim of this report is to consider the reasons for the high level of discontent among first year university students. According to a recent newspaper report and letters in *The Age*, the main reasons for this dissatisfaction are difficulties with transition from secondary school, problems with inappropriate decisions and concerns about inadequate funding at universities.

2.0 TRANSITION FROM SECONDARY SCHOOL

In the first year of university, many students face personal, financial, social and educational problems. The recent report by Monash and Melbourne universities has revealed that lack of preparation for university is a significant factor in students’ dissatisfaction with university. Richards (1999, p. 2) indicated that students generally felt that their schools had not prepared them well for studying at university. Jason Om (1999, p. 14), a first year student, suggested that the final year of school is restricted to learning how to pass the VCE and does not teach students to become independent learners.

2.1 Inappropriate Decisions

Apart from difficulties with adapting to methods of teaching at university, some students have problems with their chosen course or with their lack of life experience.

2.2 Wrong Course

It is difficult, early in their final year of school, for students to decide on a university course. Many students make inappropriate choices because they have not received sufficient course advice from their schools and also from universities (Richards, 1999, p. 2) or because they are simply too young at 17 or 18 to make decisions about their futures (Martin, 1999, p. 32).
2.2.1. Lack Of Life Experience

Some people have suggested that students would benefit by having a year off between school and university as one method to reduce dissatisfaction with first year university. This would provide life skills and some financial independence to help students to cope with the demands of university (Walton, 1999, p.14). Martin (1999, p. 32) suggests that students could benefit from a year of general studies to allow time to consider possible course options before making decisions that will affect their futures.

3.0 IMMATURE

Godman (1999, p.16) complains that first-year students are immature in their approach to their studies. She blames their dissatisfaction on their own lack of application. Walton (1999, p.14) agrees that first-year students have limited attention spans and a generally apathetic attitude.

4.0 INADEQUATE FUNDING AT UNIVERSITY

Another factor that contributes to students’ dissatisfaction is the “shameful” (Walton, 1999, p. 14) facilities at universities today. Diane Walton (1999, p. 14) describes inadequate lecture theatres, overcrowded tutorials and computer laboratories without computers. She also describes lecturers as too preoccupied with their own studies or outside work commitments to provide the necessary teaching required by first year students.

5.0 CONCLUSION

First year students are disillusioned at the end of their first semester at university for a number of reasons. They are disappointed that VCE has not provided sufficient preparation for tertiary study and that they enter university without the necessary skills for independent learning. There is also a general feeling that school leavers lack the maturity to make the career choices required and also to appreciate and cope with the demands of tertiary studies.

Does the Conclusion:
 refer back to introduction
 summarise research,
 make a concluding statement?
 Is it an effective conclusion?
6.0 REFERENCE LIST


3

READING LIST

For information on general report writing techniques:


For assistance with writing style and grammar:


Students who need extra assistance with written English should consult the Student Learning Unit.