Report writing

Purpose and audience

- A report provides clearly organised information and/or data about a situation or problem under investigation.
- The information/data may come from your experience, your reading, experiments or measurements conducted in a laboratory or out in the field.
- Your assignment might specify the type of audience of your report – e.g. non-specialist readers, specialists in your field of study. If unsure, clarify with your lecturer.
- Knowing your audience will determine how much information and how much context you need to provide, and the choice of technical and non-technical language in your writing.

Report structure
1. Abstract/Executive Summary – see Assignment types: abstract and executive summary.

2. Introduction:
   - The introduction provides an overview of the report.
   - Describe your aims and objectives explicitly, and the context of the problem or situation.
   - If relevant, indicate the scope or limitations of your investigation.
   - If necessary, provide a brief historical background (with subheadings) of significant events leading up to the present investigation.
   - If the explanation of the context is lengthy, you may want to make it a separate section and call it Background/Context/Definitions/Key Terms.
   - If you are required to provide an analysis of existing research, you will need a separate section and call it Literature Review.
   - Use the present tense to outline the problem and your aims.
   - Use past tense to describe events that have occurred when giving background information or context.

3. Method:
   - List the procedures and process undertaken in your investigation in clear order. If necessary, use subheadings like Sample, Instruments.
   - For a technical report, you may need to include descriptions of materials, equipment and resources.
   - Use the past tense as the events of the research are over.
   - Unless you are told specifically to write in first person, choose impersonal sentence structures such as passive constructions, e.g. 20 students were selected randomly to form the sample group instead of I selected 20 students randomly to form the sample group.

4. Findings/Results/Data:
   - Present your information in a clear and logical sequence.
• You may want to use charts, tables, graphs and pictures to demonstrate your results. These are collectively called figures in a report. Make sure that each of these is labelled and numbered consecutively.

• If you have a large amount of empirical results, include them in an appendix.

• Use the past tense and passive construction to describe what was found, in keeping with the impersonal tone of the report.

5. Discussion/Analysis:

• This section resembles a short essay – it is a connected series of sentences that explain and argue for an interpretation of the evidence in the report.

• Use the present tense to discuss the ongoing situation as revealed in the investigation. Check with your lecturer if you should adopt a personal or impersonal tone in the discussion.

6. Conclusion:

• This section is like the summary of an essay – it provides an overall purpose of the report, the steps through which it has progressed, and its overall findings and point of view.

• No new material should be included in the conclusion.

7. Recommendations/Implications:

• If the nature of the report has been to identify actions to be taken as a result of the findings, they should be listed here sequentially.

• Use the past tense to review what the report found, and comment in the present tense.

8. References:

• Demonstrates that you have researched the area.

• Demonstrates that you are enlisting the support of someone’s research to support your own ideas and findings.

• Demonstrates what ideas or information you have referred to from someone’s research as distinct from your own.

• Demonstrates that you acknowledge and give credit to the work of someone else.
• Make sure that you are familiar with the referencing style as prescribed by your faculty.

• Only include those references that you have used in your report (i.e. those that you have cited in the report).

9. Appendices:

• An appendix is any extra material that you wish to include at the end of your report for the audience to consider.

• It may be that it is not essential in the body of the report itself, or is too lengthy and would interrupt the flow of information.

• In some cases, it may be evidential material on which your findings are based (e.g. statistical calculations or data from another source).

• Each appendix should be titled and numbered (e.g. Appendix A, Appendix B), and listed in the table of contents.

Adapted from the following source: