

## ***Communication Skills: Lecture No. 17***

### **Module 6**

#### **Lecture 1**

## **REPORT WRITING**



In this lecture you will learn about the significance of a report, its characteristics, types and its structure.



### THE NEED FOR REPORTS



As a student, you spend most of your time in reading, listening, and speaking. However, once you get a job, and enter the professional arena, you are bound to devote 70 to 80 % of your time in writing or interpreting reports. You will be dealing with reports that are factual accounts recorded objectively about significant aspects of business transactions.

Sometimes reports are not written by a single individual; committees are formed for writing reports and these committees actually suggest further recommendations. Many actions are taken based on these recommendations, in which, you will be an integral part. A report trains you as a writer in a very planned and orderly manner to deal with procedures and logical presentation of ideas and information. Report writing develops the power of discrimination, organization, judgment and communication.



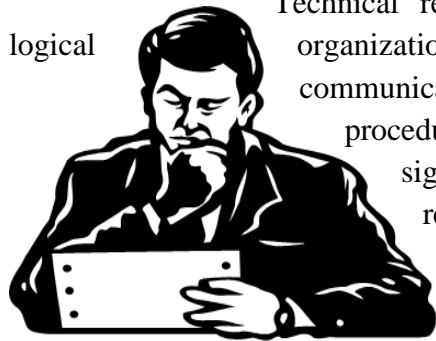
## CHARACTERISTICS OF TECHNICAL REPORTS

Most of the times, you will be involved in writing technical reports. Hence, you need to know their characteristics. First of all, the word ‘report,’ comes from *reportare*, which means to *carry back*. A report thus is a description of an event carried back to someone who was not present on the scene. For instance, a friend of yours tells you that in the morning she met with a minor accident. Out of your curiosity, you might ask her how it happened. Then she starts describing the entire event. Her description of something that happened in which you were not present amounts to a report. In a very funny sense, even gossips amount to reports. But the only difference between a gossip and technical report is that the former has no objective facts; it is based entirely on rumors, whereas, technical report relies on factual information, scientifically analyzed with logically supported argument and recommendations.



Similarly, many memorandums, letters, news items, analysis of election results can also be considered in a broad sense as reports. However, you are concerned with those kind of reports which are written in a formal manner by scientists, engineers, business executives, administrators and technocrats. Most of the times, these people send these reports as part of their day to day activities.

Technical reports emanate from careful investigation, sound thinking, organization, and clear and formal writing. In this way, a report is a formal communication written for a specific purpose. It includes a description of procedures followed by collection and analysis of data, their significance, the conclusions drawn from them, and recommendations, if required.



An objective report writing is very different from an emotional poetry writing. Written analytically, a report is not an outpouring of powerful feelings. A report writer should examine and present objectively the data collected. His conclusion and recommendations are strictly based on the facts included in the report. So if you do not have facts, you cannot form conclusion merely based on your emotions. Your intuition, if at all, has to be again backed up by objective facts, scientific analysis, and if required, certain observations made systematically and continuously. Look at another interesting definition, description, characteristic of report that comes from Shearing way back in 1965. He said that a report is like a swimming suit: “It covers everything that has to be covered but nothing more. . . .” A swimming suit does not distract attention from the content by unnecessary frills, similarly, a report covers the exact point that needs to be covered.



## TYPES OF REPORTS

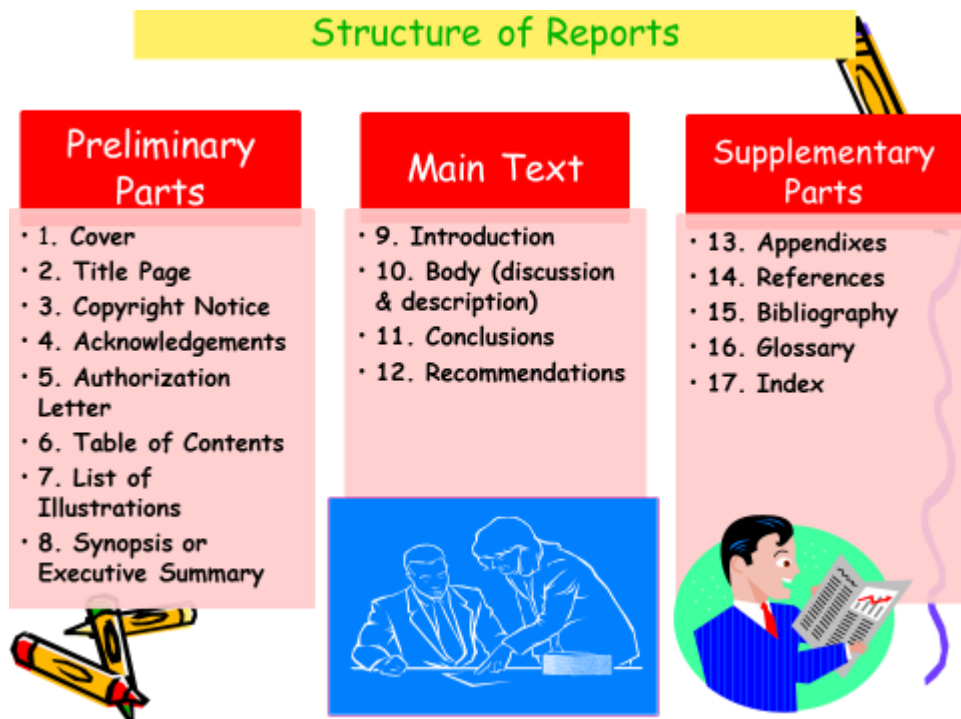
Basically, reports are either oral or in written form. Oral report involves face to face communication. So, the advantage here is that you can observe the nonverbal part of communication and evaluate the actual message. If you are a shrewd observer, you can detect easily that a person is lying to you. However, the disadvantage of oral communication is that unless it is recorded, it cannot be reproduced. Due to its ephemeral nature, less value is attached to it in business communication.



To the contrary, a written report is more accurate and permanent. The reader can skim the abstract and can refer back to it as and when required. A written report, in its printed/typed form, can be divided further into formal and informal categories. In professional communication, formal reports are normally in use, and these reports are further classified as *informational*, *interpretive* and routine. Informational reports generally contain only the data collected or the facts observed. They present the situation as it is and not as it should be. Which means they will just quantify the fact and pass whatever is observed without any concluding remarks or recommendations based on the reporter's judgment. Whereas, in case of interpretive or analytical report, the facts are presented with evaluation, data interpretation, the reporter's conclusions and recommendations for future actions. A routine report is formally written in prescribed form. Often the reporter does it in the form of simply putting ticks or crosses on the boxes provided in a predesigned format. Performance Appraisal Reports, Periodic and Progress Reports, Inspection Reports, etc., fall under this category.

## STRUCTURE OF REPORTS

A good formal report contains seventeen elements, which are grouped into three major categories, namely, preliminary parts, main text, and supplementary parts. Preliminary parts are the matter which will come in the front. The main text is the body, which is followed by the supplementary parts.



## PRELIMINARY PARTS

The preliminary parts of a report consist of the *cover*, *title page*, *copyright notice*, *acknowledgements*, *authorization letter*, *table of contents*, *list of illustrations*, and *synopsis or executive summary*. In certain cases, the synopsis is called abstract.

## COVER

For cover, you can use your company's standard cover imprinted with logo and the company's name. If the company does not insist on using a prescribed cover, then you are free to choose your own cover. Nonetheless, you cannot use flowery and gaudy covers. You should use a heavy paper or light coloured card for cover.

The basic purpose of a cover is to prevent the manuscript from regular wear and any kind of damage. It carries the title with the writer's name, the submission date, classification (confidential, secret, etc.), and a number, if required. The inside of the front and the back of cover is left blank.

## THE TITLE PAGE

The title is placed on the first right hand page of a report. When the reader opens the report, the title page is seen on the first right hand side. It contains detailed/additional information of data presented on the cover. Thus, it gives the full title and/or adds the subtitle. This is followed by the name and the address of the author; the name of the authority who sanctioned the contract, the project number, approvals, distribution list (to whom it should be circulated), and date.

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*All rights are reserved. No part of this report may be reproduced in any form or by any means without permission in writing from the publisher.*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

You need to acknowledge the people who helped you write the report. So, here you make a list of the names of persons and organizations that helped you in the production of the report. You should include the libraries that you consulted, the librarians who helped you, researchers who shared their materials, and so on.

## AUTHORIZATION LETTER

The authorization letter refers to the written authorization either in the form of a letter or in the form of a memo (short for memorandum). This letter specifies the problem, the scope, the duration (that is, the time in which it should be finished—six month, one year, two year, five year project), the budget restriction, specific instructions (related to the methodology that has to be followed, the statistical information that has to be collected) and the dead line (the final time in which it should be submitted).

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Often *the table of contents* are simplified to *contents*. The *contents* outlines the coverage, the sequence, and significance of information in the report. It will be usually mentioned in the form of chapters: *chapter 1, chapter 2, chapter 3, chapter 4, chapter 5, chapter 6*. And it begins with *preface, acknowledgments*, etc., and ends with the back matter containing *conclusion, recommendations, glossary, and index*.

Nonetheless, the *contents* are required only if the report exceeds ten pages. As it gives a bird's eye view, the reader can identify easily a specific topic and choose to read the item that interests him/her.

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

The *list of illustrations* details all the figures, images, visual aids, pictures, graphic designs, photographs and tables. In case the list becomes longer than a page, then the tables are separated from the figures.



## SYNOPSIS OR EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The ‘synopsis or executive summary’ is also synonymous with ‘Abstract’. You can also use *abstract* to indicate the condensed content of the report. It tells in concentrated form what the report is about. The extent of coverage is also mentioned here, and in summary, it tries to give the substance of the report. Overall, it presents the report in a nutshell without any illustrations and explanations. It often includes the method of analysis, the significant findings, important conclusions and major recommendations.

## MAIN TEXT

The main text comprises *introduction*, *body* that deals with discussion and description, *conclusions* and *recommendations*.

## INTRODUCTION

The introduction offers a good starting point by telling the reader what the report is about. It updates the reader by informing about previous works and highlights the new grounds covered in the present study. Thus, it sets the scene and prepares the reader to follow and comprehend the information. It includes: the historical and technical survey, the scope of study (specifying its limitations and relevance), methods of collecting data and their sources, and definition of special terms and symbols.

## BODY

The major component of the main text of report is the *body*, which contains the discussion or description part of the report. In terms of length, this is the lengthiest part of a report because it contains the central ideas and arguments of the report with all the illustrations and tables. The body presents the data in an organized form, discusses their significance, and analyzes the results. If the data is too much, it is not presented in the main body; but it is given in the appendix. You can also find footnotes or parenthetical statements in the body. While presenting the ideas, the backward order is used. This means, it begins with the end result; what was found than with how it was found.

## CONCLUSIONS

The main text ends with the concluding remarks by the author, which will actually summarize the main idea and highlight the recommendations. If the writer wants to reemphasize an important point that s/he thinks that the reader should not miss, this is one more time where s/he can reiterate that important point and then summarize succinctly. The conclusion will also suggest the course of action for the reader to take. All conclusions must be supported by what has gone before, nothing new should be added at this stage. If the results and findings of the conclusions are large, they may be itemized in the descending order of importance.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations specifically suggest future course of action. However, if they are very few then they are merged with conclusions. Sometimes only this part of the report is frequently referred to and seriously read for taking decisions. Recommendations are given only if they are expected or the nature of the report demands them.

## SUPPLEMENTARY PARTS

The supplementary parts contain the following five components: *appendixes*, *references*, *bibliography*, *glossary*, and *index*. Although they are the back matter of the report, they are equally important because they give the scientific evidence of the fact that you really conducted an objective report.

## APPENDIXES

An appendix contains materials related to the report; but they are too detailed or lengthy to be included in the main text. The reader can safely omit reading it without any loss of understanding of the contents or feel disconnected from the main thought flow. Whether to give certain material in an appendix or not is decided on two factors. One: whether it sustains the theme and forms an essential and integral part of the report. Two: whether it would interrupt the train of the reader's thought if included in the main body. All appendixes should be referred to in the text; whether they are questionnaires or statistical data. They must also be labeled as for example:

*Appendix A: Questionnaire*

*Appendix B: Statistical Data*

## LIST OF REFERENCES

In the list of references, the report writer gives credit to the works referred to or quoted. This is done by citing such works in the text and listing them in alphabetical order at the end. If their number is small, they can be mentioned in the form of footnotes at the bottom of the page on which they are cited. The foot note is numbered sequentially by superscript font or by simply superscribing an asterisk or star mark [<sup>1</sup> \*]. It gives in detail the author's name and title in full, and the details about publication (the place, the name and the year), and the page numbers.

For example:

<sup>1</sup>Alan Warner, *A Short Guide to English Style*, Oxford University Press, London, ELBS Edition, 1964, pp. 40-42.

This is a typical example of a reference where commas are used to separate items and the author name is arranged with the first name followed by the surname. However, in a *bibliography*, the items will not be separated by commas but by full stops.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bibliography literally means the list of *books* that you have referred to. By extension, it refers to the articles or any kind of work that you have referred to. It is alphabetically arranged list of published/unpublished works, consulted before or during the preparation of the report. You need to keep the following in mind; one, the order of writing the names and surnames of authors; two: the sequences of details; three: the punctuation marks, and four: the layout.

In bibliography, the second name or surname is placed first. All the items are separated by full stops. The edition comes before the place of publication. Similarly, the place of publication comes before the name of the publisher and the year of publication. The second line and the subsequent ones are intended.

**For example:**

Warner, Alan. *A Short Guide to English Style*. ELBS Edition. London: Oxford University Press, 1964.

## **GLOSSARY**

Glossary is a list of technical words used in the report and their explanations. It briefly explains jargons and unfamiliar terms in the form of a small dictionary format. If the number of entries is small, it can be explained in footnotes. The inclusion of it depends on the level of understanding and background of the readers.

## **INDEX**

Index is intended to serve as a quick guide to the material of the report. It enables the reader to locate easily any topic, sub-topic or important aspect of the contents. Key words are entered and arranged in alphabetical order, and then, cross referenced. All page numbers on which information about an entry is available are mentioned against it. For example:

### **Reports**

**audience for, 121, 156-157**

**characteristics of, 131-132, 148**

## **CITATION METHOD**

The citation method, which is sometimes called style sheet, varies as follows:

## Citation Method

- Students follow:
  - *Modern Language Association (MLA)*
  - *American Psychological Association (APA)*
- Publishers follow:
  - *The Chicago Manual of Style*

## PERSONAL GAIN

If you are wondering what you will gain from writing a report for your company, then you should note that there are at least three personal gains as follows:

### Personal Gain

- Logical thinking is enhanced
- Intellectual capacity to write good reports will impress your superiors
- Writing skills can help you advance in your career



## Report Writing

### Next Lecture

- Preparatory Steps to Writing Reports
- Evaluation of Material
- Organizing Material
- The First Draft
- Use of Illustrations



## REFERENCES

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