

General advice on writing a report

Report or Essay

Throughout the design and innovation modules you will find that you are asked to write reports, although you may also be asked to submit other things besides. However, depending on your chosen specialism, you may find that you will need to write essays rather than reports for your specialist subjects. This is particularly true for students taking the Arts specialism. Advice on Essay writing can be found on the OUStudy Skills site.

General advice on writing a report

A report is a structured piece of writing designed to present findings or recommendations to a specific audience. A good report has a clear structure and is written in sections, with subheadings. When writing assignments you should consider the different parts of the question and use subheadings that reflect what you have been asked to do. There are many possible ways that an academic report might be structured depending on the task you have been set. A simple report structure is summarised in the table below, however in your studies you may come across reports that ask for any of the following sections:

- Abstract or executive summary
- Introduction
- Literature review
- Methods
- Results, data, findings
- Discussion
- Conclusion and recommendations
- Bibliography or reference list,
- Appendices

Typical report structure

Section	Purpose	Description
Title	Briefly describes what the report is about.	Clear, brief and relevant to the content.
Introduction	Defines the purpose and scope of the report.	This gives essential background information to enable the reader to understand the context of the report. It focuses on, and perhaps defines, any key words. It should also outline how the report is organised.
Main body, e.g.	Presents a description, and sometimes data, that	The main body of a report should be divided into sections under headings and

Discussion, Methods, Results, data, findings,	includes all the relevant information required to meet the purpose of the report.	possibly sub-headings. Normally you will need to devise your own headings as appropriate to your report – don't use 'Main body' as a heading! Each section should have its own purpose and be organised around a key aspect of the description. Where appropriate, evidence and examples should be used to support the points you make.
Conclusion(s)	Summarises in a few sentences the main points made in the report.	Conclusions should refer back to the purpose of the report, as stated in the Introduction. No new information should be introduced at this stage. Conclusions are drawn from what has gone before.
References	References to any sources that have informed your answer	For an OU TMA your references should include reference to the module material as well as to any external sources that you have used.
Appendices	Appendices may be asked for to support your answer	Appendices should be referred to in the main body of text, if they are not then it will not be clear why they are there.

Structure

It is important to make have a clear structure to a report, this will act as a framework for your answer and help you to address the question. Headings and subheading are particularly helpful in a report as they act as signposts for the reader. When you are writing look at whether the headings would make sense if you took the content away. The main headings you use will probably derive from the question but the subheadings will depend on your approach to the answer and not everyone's will be the same.

Writing Style

General advice on the grammar for report writing is to use a formal style and avoid use of the first person, i.e. using 'I', 'me' and 'my' For example instead of saying "I carried out research using xxx method" a more formal way would be to say "Research was carried out using xxx method". However, occasionally you may need to express a personal opinion or report on an individual activity. In these circumstances, you should use your judgement to decide what is appropriate, or follow any guidance that is given.

Try not to be too opinionated in your writing, try to find a neutral way to express your view. For example instead of saying “this is a rubbish idea” consider saying “there are a number of problems with this idea such as...”

Several aspects of good report writing are shared with other pieces of formal written work. You need to write in proper sentences and paragraphs unless otherwise specified. Try to keep your sentences reasonably short; very long sentences can be difficult to follow. As a general rule, each sentence should make just one point.

Presentation, spelling and grammar are important. It is always worth taking some time at the end to read through your report, looking for any errors and checking that it all makes sense.

Using your own words

When you refer and discuss materials it is important, as far as possible to paraphrase them as this helps to show that you have understood them. Key terms, concepts or ideas do not need to be paraphrased e.g. “sustainable design” “innovation frame”. If you do quote something, for example as evidence to support an argument you are making, then you should use quotation marks and reference the source.

Writing succinctly

Many students worry about keeping within the word count of an assignment. Writing succinctly takes a little practice but once you get the hang of it you will find that it comes more naturally. Think about the key message that you want to get across, succinct writing will help you to get that across more strongly than writing that is too wordy. However, a word of caution, there is a difference between being succinct and being so brief that you say too little and miss out vital information.

How to be succinct

Look at your sentence construction. Are there any superfluous words? Could you say the same thing differently without losing meaning?

If you have gathered lots of information for your assignment it is important to identify the key information using notes or a highlighter pen and to be selective about what you use. Pick out the most important points, crucially those most relevant to the question and summarise information rather than reproducing it in its entirety.

Example of how to reduce a sentence

- a. You are advised *that there is a* need to keep to the word limit *in assignments by* keeping *your* sentences short (20 words)
- b. You are advised to keep to the word limit by using short sentences (13 words cut down from the sentence above)
- c. Use short sentences to keep within the word limit. (9 words, rearranged sentence)

Words in italics in sentence a. are superfluous. The underlined word in sentence c. is a new addition that enables the rearrangement of the sentence.

Try it for yourself

Rephrase the following paragraph to retain its key points, how many words can you get it down to? Be ruthless.

“Solar power offers the peace of mind that no other energy source can provide, a clean, reliable, and noise free energy source. The sun provides energy for many of the processes that takes place on earth such as photosynthesis and climate control, therefore it seems only reasonable the we attempt to use some of this vast supply of energy in an effort to create an alternative power source to fossil fuels. Solar power is used throughout the world in various applications, whether it provides power to pump drinking water in Africa or is integrated into a commercial building in London” (100 words)

Here is an attempt which says the same thing but with 44% fewer words:

“Solar power provides clean, reliable, and noise free energy. Many natural processes such as photosynthesis utilise solar energy and people too can use this vast energy source as an alternative to fossil fuels. Solar power is used globally for various applications, from powering a drinking water pump in Africa to lighting a commercial building in London.” (56 words)

Referencing

Referencing is an important part of academic writing, but lots of students find it hard to understand how to use references to their best advantage. Hopefully this short guide will help.

What is the point of references?

Having your own ideas is a good thing but showing how your thoughts build on or relate to the ideas of other writers, gives your arguments strength. Academic assessments expect you to relate your work to other authors and to present evidence to back up your claims or arguments. This evidence could be ideas, concepts or examples.

Getting ready to reference

Starting points

When you are faced with an assignment one of the first things to do is to look at the question and then search for relevant ideas and, if appropriate, examples. For an OU course your starting point is most likely to be the teaching texts and other media for a block of study. In other academic settings you might start with a reading list or recommendations from a lecturer.

Key Points

As you study the relevant material, look for key points that relate to the question in some way. Make a note of each of these points and against each one write the details of the author, date, title, publisher, place of publication and page numbers so that you can easily identify where the ideas come from when you are writing your assignment.

External references

Sometimes in assignments you are asked to carry out research of external sources, for example to find up to date examples, or to find alternative perspectives. Your sources might be books, journal articles, web-pages or other media. As you carry out your research you will find it helpful to note the key points and their sources as suggested above.

Tools to help

The Open University Library has links to a number of tools that can help you to gather and manage references as you conduct research. Try them out to find one that suits the way you work and think.

<http://www.open.ac.uk/library/help-and-support/bibliographic-management>

Using references in your answer

Plan

When you have generated a list of key points to cover, look again at the question and consider the structure of your answer. What do you want to say? Try and write this down simply at first. It may help to map out a structure for your answer too. In this structure, identify where the points and examples you have identified will support what you want to say.

Weave

As you write your answer you need to weave the references into it. How you do this will depend on the point you want to make and the way you develop your argument. If you use the author's name in the discussion then you only need to put the date after the name (in brackets). If you refer to an idea which is attributable to an author without naming them directly then put the author name and date in brackets after that idea.

Below are some examples of how references might be used within a text, at the end of this document is a chart showing how to reference different forms of authorship and media:

Stating an author's view:

"Cook (2014), says that the innovation frame"

Discussing a concept or idea:

"Sustainability needs to be considered at the level of product, service and system (Dewberry 2014)....."

Showing complementary or opposing points of view from different authors or sources:

"Pugh's (1998) model of new product development is broadly similar to that proposed by Ulrich and Eppinger (2000), but there are some significant differences, notably...."

Putting forward your own idea in relation to other authors:

"It could be argued that visions of the future are the territory of politicians and not designers however, Lotz (2014), shows how designers act as interpreters of visions"

Using an example

"The case of LEGO (Holden 2014) highlights the need for a process of innovation"

Illustrating a point

If you are including the image in your assignment then give your images figure numbers with title and creator details as below:



Fig 1: Bucolic Wind by Georgy Holden (2010)

List the details with your text references e.g.:

Holden, G. (2010), digital photograph, Bucolic wind, downloaded from <http://www.flickr.com/photos/georgyh/4963463885/> Accessed 20 July 2014

Reference List

At the end of your assignment you need to list the full references for each of your sources. Follow the guidance on referencing style that can be downloaded from the OU Library:

<http://library.open.ac.uk/help/howto/citeref/>

Check

Always check your references when you have finished your assignment. Do the in-text references match up to the reference list. Have you ordered your list alphabetically so that it is easy to find each reference? If you use the "Create a bibliography" tool, alphabetical listing will be done automatically, but if not you may have to rearrange your list.

What not to do

- Don't use so many references that the text becomes unreadable.
- Don't have a separate reference for each page of a book or article. Instead, identify a page range, that encompasses the ideas that you want to reference.
- On the other hand, don't make your references so general it is hard to locate sources. Think about whether your reference gives the reader enough information to find the text you are referring to.
- Don't just add a list of references at the end without referring to them in the text of your assignment.
- Don't bolt references on at the end, think about them from the beginning when you plan your assignment as they will help you to gain marks.