

WRITING BUSINESS REPORTS

6

The aim of this unit is to assist you develop the technique of writing good reports that help companies, institutions, organisations. The lessons are prepared with topics such as meaning, importance, principles, and structure of reports.

After reading this unit you will find that the information and advice given in the lessons have helped you develop your confidence and abilities to:

- focus your attention on your readers background, their needs, and formulate your purpose in order to adapt your messages to the readers level of understanding
- differentiate between your primary versus secondary readers and be possessed with the knowledge and skills of writing good reports
- define, explain the term report.

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UNIT-6

Lesson-1: Writing for Readers

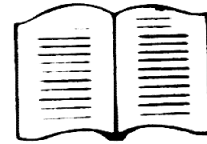
After reading this lesson you will be able to:

- define the term report
- adjust your messages to your readers' needs and level of technicality
- distinguish between your primary and secondary readers.

Introduction

Suppose you work for The Nabisco Company Limited and have to spend about 70% of your time in writing and speaking to people both in and outside your company.

Sometimes you are explaining something to someone, sometimes you are describing some items to some one, or writing a note to your colleague, or writing an instruction for the new employee, or recording minutes of a meeting or sometimes you are summarising information for someone. In all these situations what are you doing in fact? You are reporting responsibilities to various people on various occasions for various purposes.



What is a report?

A report serves as a concrete measure of a person's job performance and also as a foundation for all future actions on any particular project.

The term 'report' can be defined as, "a document in which a given problem is examined for the purpose of conveying information, reporting findings, responsibilities, putting forward ideas and sometimes making recommendations on the basis of which the decision makers make decisions and take actions."

Today we often rely on weather reports, credit reports, consumer reports, sales reports, proposal and analytical reports of all types before we make any decision. A written report is often the only record which is made of results that have come out of years of thought and effort.

A report is an account of any kind of investigation.

Reports are an integral part of business communication because report does a job of carrying information — facts and ideas — to someone who needs it. Reports can either be oral or written. In this book, we will deal only with written reports. Written reports, because it is a permanent record has many advantages, some of them are as follow.

- It compels the reporter to be complete and accurate.
- The facts recorded are not likely to be distorted because all readers get some report to read.
- It can be referred to anyone in its original form again and again.



ACTIVITY-1

Which of the three situations below is indicating an action of a report?

- You are buying some groceries from a shop where you are a regular customer. You even do not have to ask for the prices, so you just picked up the items you needed.
- Recently you thought of a particular problem of your locality and described the problem to the Mayor who will use your information as a basis for action.
- You are enjoying a cup of hot coffee while reading your newspaper on a Friday morning.

Why do you write reports? How do you adjust your message to your reader's needs?

All managers, supervisors, administrators have to write and deal with someone else's writing as part of their normal duties at work. The higher their position the more they write. As an effective communicator the higher your goals, the more efficiently you need to write all types of reports.

Before writing any report or document, identify your purpose, and evaluate all you can about your readers' background and situation. When you write for a particular reader, or a group of readers you can focus sharply on your readers by asking specific questions:

- Who wants the report? Who else will read it?
- Why do they want the report? How will they use it? What purpose do I want to achieve?
- What is the technical background of the primary readers? Of the secondary readers?
- How much do the readers already know about the subject? How much more do I have to supply?
- What exactly do the readers need to know and in what format?
- When is the report due?

Answers to all of the above questions will help you formulate your purpose and assess reader's needs. Remember, purpose and reader's need these are the two elements that govern the whole process of communication. If your readers are well known to you ask them directly:

- Do they merely want a record of your activities or progress?
- Are you expected to supply only raw data or conclusions and recommendations as well?
- Will your readers take immediate action based on your report?
- Do they need step by step instructions?

- Are they merely collecting information for later use?
- Will the documents be read and discarded, filed, or published?
- What is most important from your readers' point of view?
- Have they requested a letter, memo, short report or a formal report with supplements (little page, table of contents, appendices, glossary and so on)?

Also you should assess your organisation's climate (receptive, repressive, co-operative) and decide before writing any document how outspoken you can afford to be without offending anyone and risking your own job. Again whichever combination of needs and attitude your readers have, you must do your best to satisfy each reader's major interest. If you are writing for general readers without knowing your primary and secondary readers, then aim for the non-technical, simple, direct, and conversational language.

- Reports are written for readers who will use the information as a basis for taking actions and reports help all business institution, organisations run smoothly by recording information systematically.
- Good reports connects with its readers by recognising their differences in background, their specific needs, and their preferences.

ACTIVITY-2

Assume that a new employee is taking over your job (part time or full time) because you have been promoted. Identify a specific problem in your old job that could cause difficulty for the new employee. Write for the employee instructions for avoiding or dealing with the problem. Before writing perform a reader analysis by answering (on paper) the questions on page 3 and 4.



Who are your Primary and Secondary readers?

Whenever you write the same basic message for different level of readers classify your readers as primary and secondary. Your *Primary readers* are usually those who have requested for the report or document and who will probably use it as a basis for actions. *The Secondary readers* are those who will read your report (or perhaps only part of it) for information that will help them to get the job done or who will help the primary readers in arriving at a conclusion or decision.

Sometimes these two readers will differ in technical background i.e., primary readers may need highly technical messages, and secondary readers may need semi-technical messages or vice versa. When you have to write for readers at different levels (highly technical, semi-technical or non-technical), follow these guidelines:

If your report is a short one such as a memo, a letter or anything less than two pages, rewrite it at various levels for various readers.

If your document or the report is longer than two pages, maintain a level of technicality that connects with your primary readers. Then supplement the report with appendices addressed to the secondary readers (technical appendices if secondary readers are technical persons or vice versa). The letter of transmittal, information abstract (or summary), and glossaries are other supplements that help the non-technical persons understand a highly technical report.

Although you write to satisfy the primary readers first, you should not ignore the secondary readers at all. Your choice of what you write, how you write it (format, organisation, style) are determined by your writing situation. So follow all the information given in this lesson one to identify your purpose, audience and, situation before you write anything.

Central message

Primary readers are persons who have requested for the report and who will use it as a basis for taking actions. Secondary readers are usually those persons who help and advise the primary readers on making any decisions. But all reports are written choosing the level of technicality of the primary readers. The writers supplement their long reports with appendixes, glossary, etc., addressed to the secondary readers.



ACTIVITY-3

Assume that your Dean of the School of Business has requested you to write a short report discussing the kind of writing and speaking assignments you expect in your careers. On the basis of your report he (Dean) will certify you for the "advanced course in communication skills." All the other subject lecturers will read and evaluate your report to help the Dean take final decision. So who are your primary and Secondary readers? Who do you write the report for and how do you adjust your report's level of technicality?

Lesson-2: Principles and Structure of Reports

After reading this lesson you will be able to:

- apply the principles in writing reports
- structure your reports under the rules of good communications i.e., having an introduction-body-conclusion structure.

Principles of writing good reports

Your value to any organisation depends on how efficiently you can communicate what you know. All good reports result from the planning, drafting and revising decisions that collectively make up the writing process. The readers hate waste and demand efficiency i.e., they want just as much as they need-and no more than they need. They want that every detail in the report should serve a useful purpose; every sentence and word should carry its own weight, advancing the writer's meaning. So to make it efficient every report must conform to the principles of communications: *accuracy*, *brevity* and *clarity*.



- A. **Accuracy-** All information provided in the report must be checked and double checked to ensure its accuracy. All the factual information must be based on evidence to support your facts. For example, when there is likely to be disagreement or doubt on the part of the reader, always try to quote the authority for supporting your facts (as witnesses). Where it is necessary to quote an opinion then say, it is an opinion.
- B. **Brevity-** Whenever you write any report, be an informal or formal type, aim for maximum efficiency. Never use six words when two will do. This applies to many phrases in common use that are now regarded as a sign of bad writing. For instance do not write "I am aware of the fact that" instead of "I know that" or "in this day and age" instead of to day. Give every word credit for its full meaning; it is not necessary to qualify it with other words which means the same thing, for example:
- a dead corpse — either a *dead person* or just *a corpse* should be written, Similarly do not write 'mutual co-operation' when the word "co-operation" it self means something mutually done.
- C. **Clarity-** Clarity is achieved by using the right words, precise words and simple construction of the sentences that the reader will clearly understand. The story or argument should follow a logical sequence which leads the reader naturally to the conclusions or recommendations. For example, if you are writing a sentence like this one:

Imprecise: Push the printer connector into the serial socket.

You are sure to make your readers think — "We push a perambulator, we push a chair but do we ever push a printer connector? So give your reader the correct one from below:

Good report must conform to the basic principles of report writing, being accurate, concise, and clear in its expression.

Revised: *Insert* the printer connector into the serial socket.



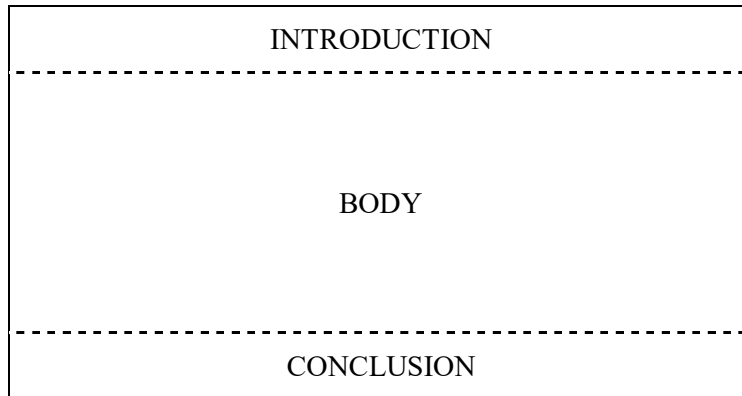
ACTIVITY-1

What are the principles that you follow in writing a good report? - Explain.

Structure of Reports

Virtually all communications including all oral and written reports should be structured as follows :

- i. having an introduction
- ii. report text (body) or development
- iii. conclusions and recommendation



Introduction

In the introduction of your report you introduce the subject and purpose of the message. Here in fact you make a promise to your readers about what will be said. Sometimes this can be achieved simply by a heading; sometimes it requires more lengthy treatment in the form of a section or paragraphs of its own. The object is to create a picture in the readers' mind about the subject or the background of it. Know your readers and give them only what they need. (Example has been shown in the sample short report).

Report Text (Body) or Development

The body section is the heart of your report. It is where you present your evidence and explanations. This being the main part of the report, make sure that you set your points down in logical sequence. Here lies the importance for remaining accurate, simple, and clear is required. Give your body section an informative title. For a descriptive report you might title the body, "Description and function of parts". For instructions, "Required Steps." For a problem solving report "Collected data." (Example has been shown in the formal short report)

Conclusions

In your conclusion, you in fact tie up the whole information by giving readers a clear perspective on the whole report. When you need to re-emphasise major findings, simply summarise them. Base recommendations directly on the findings and interpretations. In fact the concluding section of a report has many purposes; it often evaluates the significance of the report, take a position and predict an outcome, offer a solution or suggest further research. (Example has been shown in the short formal report of Unit 7)

All reports follow the defined rules of communications structure i.e., Introduction-body-conclusion.

ACTIVITY-2

These questions are designed to help you assess how far you have understood and can apply the learning you have accomplished by answering (in written form) the following questions:

1. Name the principles of writing reports and what kind of structure do you follow in writing any report? Just name them.
2. How do you write the conclusion of your report?

