

Writing a Report

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Session Objectives:

- Different types of reports
- Four steps in writing a report
- Structuring the report
- Concluding the report

Different Types of Reports

Reports are business tools that help convey information and assist in decision-making. Reports are classified into various types on the basis of form, direction, functional use, and content of the report.

The various types of reports are:

Formal or Informal Reports

The emphasis in formal reports is on objectivity with a focus on the organization. These reports should be structured carefully. Informal reports are casual, generally prepared as short messages, and are prepared for internal circulation within the organization.

Short or Long Reports

A short report is one that is only a few pages long while a report that runs into several pages is known as a long report. With increase in the number of pages, reports tend to become formal in their characteristics.

Informational or Analytical Reports

Informational reports convey objective information from one organizational area to another.

Example: Annual reports of companies, monthly sales reports of the marketing division, etc. are examples of informative reports.

Analytical reports are reports that present attempts to solve problems.

Example: A feasibility report to study the scope of running the plant on two shifts to meet the delivery deadline is an example of an analytical report.

The Proposal Report

Proposal reports help to specify how one organization can meet the needs of another. Generally, RFP's (request for proposals) are issued by government agencies. The RFP's specify the requirements of the organization issuing the RFP. The suppliers who have the potential to fulfill these needs submit their proposals in the form of a proposal report.

Vertical or Lateral Report

Reports are classified as vertical or lateral based on the direction in which they move within the organization. Vertical reports move upward or downward in the hierarchy and assist in management control. Lateral reports circulate between various departments at the same organizational level and help in bringing about organizational coordination.

Internal or External Reports

Internal reports are reports that circulate within the organization. External reports are reports that are

prepared for distribution outside the organization. These are sent to external agencies like ministries in the government, IT department etc.

Periodic Reports

Periodic reports are generated at regular intervals of time. These reports may be generated on a daily, weekly or monthly basis. Periodic reports are directed upward in the organizational hierarchy and help in management control.

Example: Daily, weekly and monthly sales reports.

Functional Reports

Functional reports provide information pertaining to various functional areas of the organization.

Example: Sales reports, production reports.

Most reports fall into more than one of the above mentioned categories.

Classification on the basis of format

Apart from the above given types of reports, reports can also be classified on the basis of format. Various types of reports on the basis of format are:

Preprinted Form

These reports require the user to fill in information in blank spaces provided for the purpose. These are used for routine information and are most appropriate for conveying numerical information.

Letter

These are a type of report directed to outsiders. They may run into a few pages and make use of personal pronouns. In addition to parts of normal letters, they also contain headings, footnotes, tables and figures.

Memo

These are informal reports that are circulated within the organization. The memo format (Date, To, From, Subject) is used in presenting the information. A memo that runs into more than 10 pages, is called a 'memo report'. A memo may have internal headings and make use of visual aids to present the information.

Manuscript

These reports are very long. They may run into a few hundred pages.

Steps in writing a report

The types of reports vary according to the subject matter and the needs of the readers. However, almost all reports consist of the following four steps:

1. Defining the problem and the purpose
2. Identifying and organizing issues for investigation
3. Conducting research
4. Analyzing and interpreting data, drawing conclusions and developing recommendations

All reports need not necessarily have all the steps.

Defining the problem and the purpose: The first step before undertaking a research study is to define the problem and the purpose of the study. It is necessary to know the purpose so as to know the factors that have to be considered to arrive at a solution.

Example:

Problem: Evaluating the cost of a new project.

Purpose: (a) The benefits that would accrue to the organization by undertaking the new project.

(b) The cost and revenue components of the new project.

Zeroing in on the problem: Answering the following questions helps one to precisely define the problem.

- What is it that has to be determined?
- Why is the issue important?
- Who are the people involved in the situation?
- Which is the trouble spot?
- When did the trouble begin?
- How did the situation arise?

Example: What: What is the best way of discharging harmful chemicals by industries?

When: During the current period

Why: For controlling pollution

Where: In industrial areas

Who: Chemical industries

Developing a statement of purpose: After clearly defining a problem statement, a statement of purpose should be drafted. The statement of purpose illustrates the reasons for developing the report. The statement of problem defines what the researcher has to investigate whereas the statement of purpose defines what the report has to accomplish.

It is a general practice to combine both problem statement and the statement of purpose in one single statement. Therefore, sometimes these terms are used interchangeably. These statements can also be presented in an informational or analytical manner. Informational statements present facts, whereas analytical statements present a comparative view.

Example: Informational purpose – Is the compensation package being paid by our company

lesser than that of other companies in the industry?

Analytical purpose – Differences between the compensation package of our company and that of other companies, impact on the morale of our employees, and ways to counter the negative consequences?

Identifying issues for investigation:

After having defined the problem statement and the purpose of the study, the areas that need to be investigated to arrive at a solution to the problem have to be identified. This is done by breaking up the 'purpose' into all its related aspects.

After investigation and solving the problem, the information has to be presented to the target audience in a structured form.

Structuring the Report

The structure of the report depends upon the purpose of the study. Reports may follow an informational or an analytical outline. If the purpose of the study is only to provide information that would be used and interpreted by someone else, then the report should have an informational outline. However, if the purpose of the study is to enable you to draw conclusions and make recommendations on the basis of the findings, then the report should follow an analytical outline.

Informational assignments

In informational assignments, the study leads to the development of a factual report in which there is no scope for analysis or interpretation of data. In such reports the information is arranged under various subtopics, each dealing with a specific subject.

The various subtopics that would comprise a factual report are:

1. According to importance
2. According to sequence
3. According to chronology
4. According to spatial orientation
5. According to category

Sometimes, a combination of these sections may be used. It is, however, important that the structure should be able to convey the subject matter to the reader clearly and effectively.

Analytical assignments

Analytical studies involve analysis, drawing conclusions from the analysis and framing recommendations. Analytical studies essentially involve problem-solving. Two of the most common methods used in analytical assignments are:

- **Hypothesis:** Hypothetical explanations are developed in this method of problem-solving. This method is adopted when the purpose of the report is to discover causes, predict results or to

suggest a solution to a problem. Hypothetical explanations are provided for every aspect of the problem and each one of them is proved or disproved by researching the issue.

Example: Problem – Why does our company have heavy turnover at the entry level?

Explanations:

I. Our salaries are too low.

A. What salary do we pay at the entry level?

B. What are the salaries paid by other companies for a similar job?

C. Can salary act as an exit barrier?

II. The work pressure is too high.

A. What are the working hours at the entry level position?

B. Are the deadlines for projects too ambitious?

C. What is the impact on the future growth prospects of the employee if he misses his deadline?

III. Growth prospects are poor in our company.

A. What is the next position above the entry level position?

B. What are the criteria for getting promoted?

- **Relative merit:** In reports based on relative merit, evaluation of the various available alternatives is made and the most appropriate alternative is chosen. The analysis is structured by focusing on the criteria or needs of the audience.

The structure of the report may vary with the writing situation. There is no standard structure that has to be followed for writing a report. Clarity and logical flow, are the two most important factors to be kept in mind while writing a report. The structure of a report may keep changing as the level of research or investigation progresses. Before beginning the research, a basic structure of the proposed report should be in mind. As the research progresses, this structure can be modified to suit the needs of the study.

Concluding the report

Conclusion, is the logical interpretation of research findings. The conclusion should be based on the information provided in the report and analysis of this information. Recommendations and suggestions for solving the problem are not to be included in the conclusion unless asked for. It is to be noted that recommendations and conclusions are different from each other.

Conclusion is essentially interpretation of findings whereas recommendations are suggestions for an appropriate action, or measures to be taken to rectify or solve problems.

Summary

Reports can be broadly classified into various types on the basis of form, direction, functional use and

content of the report. They may also be classified on the basis of format.

Report writing involves identifying the problem and the purpose of the report, identifying the issues and organizing them, conducting research and drawing conclusions from it, and making recommendations. A good report has to be well structured in its content.