

Student SkillPack

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Report Writing

**DEVELOPMENT
LEVEL**

REPORT WRITING Development Level

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A report is a common way of presenting information and advice related to a specific purpose. It is used by industry, business, commerce, professional areas, charities, and Government as a basis for decisions and policies. Courses wish to develop this skill in students because it will be applicable to all professional contexts. Employers want graduates and higher diplomats who can write effective reports.

We suggest you use this SkillPack:

- in conjunction with a report you need to write
- before you begin any work
- while you are gathering information and writing your report.

This SkillPack aims to help you turn an adequate report into a good one and produce more in-depth and professional reports, as you would at work.

When you have completed it, you should be able to:

Develop a strategy

- review your effectiveness in this area
- identify when a report is the most appropriate format to use, including for complex topics
- identify the criteria against which to judge the standard or quality of the report (eg *content, format, language*)
- identify and plan to use the most efficient and effective methods/techniques (eg *use of time and resources*) to produce the report.

Monitor progress

- use information which has been critically evaluated
- present information and argument logically
- signpost critical points, using language and layout
- appeal to and engage the reader, conveying particular effects (eg *via attractive appearance*) and using relevant information and images
- note choices made, judge their effectiveness and adapt strategies as needed (eg *to overcome difficulties*)
- seek and use feedback to improve process and outcomes.

Evaluate strategy and present outcomes

- evaluate the effectiveness of strategies used to produce the report, identifying factors which had an effect
- identify ways of further developing your report writing skills.

(Based on QCA Key Skill specifications, QCA 2000)

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1 A brief review of the basics

The Starter Level SkillPack on 'Report Writing' covers the basic requirements for producing a report. Can you meet these requirements? ✓

	Yes	Somewhat	No
Are you clear about the purpose of your report?			
Have you identified your readers' needs and characteristics?			
Do you know the correct structure of a report for your subject?			
Have you identified what needs to be done and planned your time?			
Have you allowed time to draft, write, edit and present your report?			
Do you know the information needed and how to gather it?			
Can you use information accurately?			
Can you identify the main points and order them?			
Can you present a report clearly and attractively?			
Do you know when to use images or visuals?			
Is your language appropriate for the subject, purpose, readers?			
Do you edit your draft?			

If you could improve on any of the above, the following can help:

- the Starter Level SkillPack 'Report Writing'
- the SkillPack 'Critical Analysis'
- examples of reports from your subject area: a learning centre/library or your lecturer may have examples
- the SkillPacks on 'Gathering and Using Information'
- the SkillPacks on 'Organising Yourself and Your Time'.

2 What are your aims?

2.1 What do you want to achieve?

What outcomes do you want from your report? How will you know if you have achieved them? You could complete the following box in relation to a report you are writing.

Outcomes	Criteria which will tell me I've met them
<i>eg a well-evidenced report</i>	<i>eg all key points are accurately evidenced and referenced,</i>
<i>eg to present relevant information</i>	<i>eg key, up-to-date theories used, appropriate literature references, related to reader interests</i>

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2.2 Deciding the format

You may be able to choose the format for your written assignment (eg *essay, report*). At higher levels in university, you may also be required to present complex material and ideas/concepts. Will your work:

explore ideas? develop a complex argument? have a clear structure be for 'academic' use?	✓	present information for a specific purpose? show the results of a project/investigation? be concise with a specific structure? be used by those outside university (eg <i>employer, charity, Government</i>)?	✓
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If most of your answers are in the left-hand box, an essay is probably most appropriate. The right box illustrates a report.

To help you further, you could:

- decide which best suits your topic, focus, aims and audience (see the Starter Level SkillPack on 'Report Writing'?)
- look at the assessment criteria for your assignment
- consider producing a poster, or a portfolio instead (see the SkillPack on 'Visual Communication').

3 Planning

3.1 Getting inside your reader's head

Good reports meet the reader's needs. You may be asked to produce a report for other students, your lecturers, or perhaps for outside organisations or workplace supervisors. What will your reader need and why? It can help to put yourself in their position.



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If I were the reader:
Why would I want the report?
What would I want it to tell me?
What sort of language would I understand?
What sort of language would impress me, or persuade me?
What aspects might I find difficult to understand?

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3.2 Creating a plan

You could re-visit the Starter Level SkillPack on 'Report Writing' for basic information about planning. The box below gives a useful template.

What else would make the most efficient use of your time? Possibilities are:

- group tasks together and use resources/help for them once, rather than on several occasions
- regularly review your plan, amending it as needed. You may need to adapt your ideas as you progress
- identify methods to save time (eg see other SkillPacks, such as 'Organising Yourself and Your Time', 'Action Planning' and 'Note Taking')
- anticipate problems (see the Development Level SkillPack on 'Solving Problems')
- look after yourself (see the Development Level SkillPack on 'Coping with Pressure')

Tasks	Resources/ support needed	Time needed to complete	Deadline

Monitoring your progress helps you identify the choices you are making. Are they effective in helping you meet your goals?



Choices	Effectiveness

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4 Your content

The information you use in the report must be critically evaluated – the Development Level SkillPack on 'Critical Analysis' offers more detailed guidance on evaluating information.

Good reports make any criticisms clear for the reader. It helps to:

- be accurate, objective and evaluative (ie not accepting things at face value)
- back up claims or criticisms with evidence
- make your own biases, assumptions and stance clear
- make clear any biases, assumptions or stances of others
- include evidence and criticisms which are relevant (to your subject and aims) and meaningful to the reader
- be concise. Long-winded explanations are tedious.

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Have you evaluated your information/evidence?



Information	Criticism	Evidence

You should present your information and criticisms/argument in a logical order. What will interest the readers? What angle is most likely to capture their interest? This can influence how you order your material. There is little point in having a fascinating conclusion if the reader stopped reading long ago. Your introduction can be used to gain interest.

A reader can very quickly extract the relevant information. Busy readers will want to scan the report to see what is relevant to them and then to read certain sections in more detail. What helps the reader do this is having:

- interest stimulated
- crucial points highlighted
- clear 'signposting'.

5 Style

5.1 Signposting, using language

Your reader should be able to get your meaning and find information quickly. Your use of language can help.

- Be concise – removing padding, repetition and too much detail

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- Use linking words and phrases (eg *therefore, however, on the other hand*)
- Tell the reader what is coming next (eg '*as the following section indicates...*', *an introduction which explains what is to follow, or an initial summary or synopsis of the main points*)
- Tell the reader what s/he has just read (eg '*to summarise...*'). The main summary should contain all your critical points. You could have very short summaries throughout.
- Tell the reader what is important (eg '*the main recommendation is...*').

What sort of language will appeal to your reader? Consider whether or not to use:

- technical language/jargon
- formal/more informal language
- short/long sentences/a mix
- short/simple or long/unusual/complex words
- images, similes, metaphors (what sort would appeal to them?)
- examples.

5.2 Signposting, using presentation

Signposting means helping the reader find their way through your report. The following are possibilities:

- a contents page
- clear section numbering
- clear headings
- layout: use of bullets, short blocks of text
- use of images/visuals at appropriate points to make more impact, and help understanding.

There may be particular effects you can create by using visuals (eg *to encourage charity donations, photos of maltreated animals carry an emotive message*).

Readers can be influenced by appearances. What would your reader like? You could consider:

- word processing your report
- typeface (don't use too many different one, use clear ones)
- have 'white space', not all text
- have margins for your reader to write notes
- present it in a binder
- graphics/images on the front cover (may not be acceptable for some reports – check first)
- the cost of whatever you do – money and time. Is it worth it?

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6 Editing

You could use the checklists in the Starter Level SkillPack on 'Report Writing'. You could also ask yourself if you have:

- clarified what the reader wants
- put your content in an order to lead the reader to your main points
- criticised and evaluated your information
- used language to help the reader find their way through your report
- used language and visuals to appeal to the reader
- used layout to help the reader find their way
- used an attractive form of presentation.

7 Improving what you do

How effective is your report and what do you need to improve in the future? When completing the box below, you could:

- look at your report as the reader would. What is its overall impact?
- ask for feedback from your readers. This can give you useful evidence of your report writing skills and is essential if you are to accurately evaluate yourself. You could ask for feedback from different sources (eg *tutors, friends, other students, employers, work colleagues*).

For more information on asking for and using feedback, see the SkillPacks on 'Reflecting on Your Experience'.

- look back at the criteria you identified in Section 2.1. Have you met them?
- think about the choices you made and what effect they had (eg *not to use visuals – would it be more effective to have done so?*).

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	Notes on improvement needed	Actions to be taken	Resources/ support needed	By when?
Identifying aims				
Identifying readers' needs				
Planning (tasks, time, and resources)				
Structuring the report				
Gathering information				
Criticising/ evaluating				
Presenting the report				

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	Notes on improvement needed	Actions to be taken	Resources/ support needed	By when?
Using images/ visuals				
Signposting				
Editing				

What have you learnt about how to produce a good report?

What do you most need to focus on?

Handwritten notes:

1. Introduction

2. Main body

3. Conclusion

4. References

5. Bibliography

6. Appendix

7. Glossary

8. Index

9. Summary

10. Evaluation

11. Recommendations

12. Final thoughts

7 References and bibliography

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7.1 Student skills product list

Having worked through this SkillPack you might like to know that similar structured, straightforward guidance is also available on the following topics:

- Identifying Strengths and Improving Skills
- Organising Yourself and Your Time
- Note Taking
- Gathering and Using Information
- Critical Analysis
- Essay Writing
- Oral Presentation
- Visual Communication
- Solving Problems
- Group Work
- Seminars, Group Tutorials and Meetings
- Negotiating and Assertiveness
- Coping with Pressure
- Revising and Examination Techniques
- Improving Your Learning
- Reflecting on Your Experience
- Action Planning

The Student Skills Guide Second Edition

All of the SkillPacks listed above are gathered together and are available as a paperback workbook (0 566 08430 9).

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