

# Report Writing

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## A brief guide to academic report writing

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### What are reports?

“A report is a statement of the results of an investigation or any matter on which definite information is required” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2008 p. 345).

During your time at West Lothian College you may be asked to write different types of reports. How these reports are presented will be dependent on the subject areas you have chosen. E.g. You could be asked to do laboratory/scientific reports, work placement or field trip reports. Always check with your tutor to ensure you know what is expected of you.

### How do I get started?

At the outset, writing a report can seem daunting! To make it easier to work through, it's a good idea to break your report down into manageable chunks or stages:

#### Stage 1: Understanding the Question

Make sure you understand what you have been asked to report on. This may sound obvious, but it's critical that you have a good understanding of the precise subject, the purpose of the report and why you have been asked to write it. Knowing your purpose will help you communicate your information better and will also help you be more selective when gathering information.

#### Stage 2: Planning

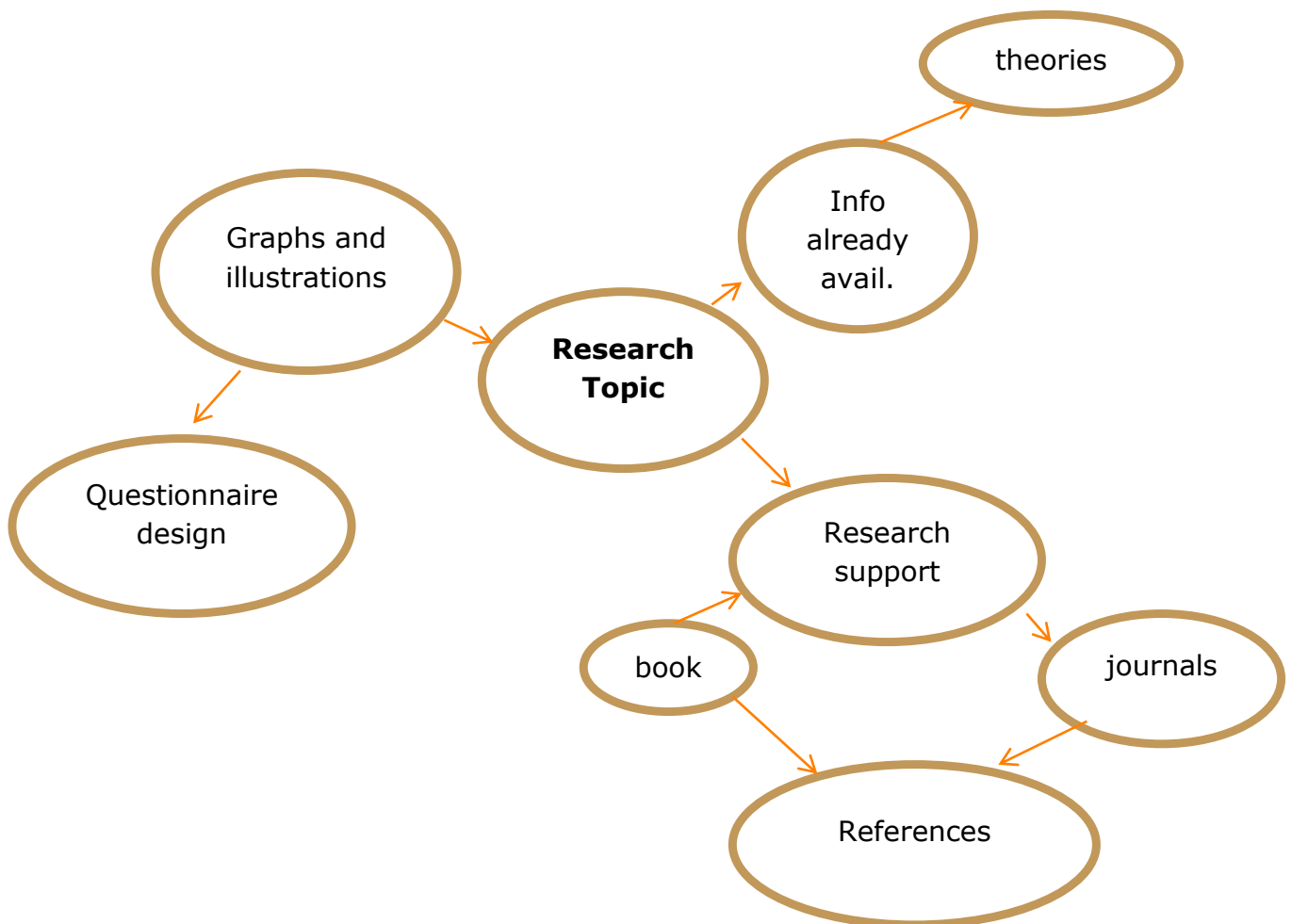
Work back from your deadline. Have your submission date firmly in your mind. Break down the task of writing the report in various stages and set yourself deadlines for those stages. This can help maintain the focus and keep you on track. Understanding what you have been asked to do and planning effectively are critical stages in your report writing. This is often a stage that students mistakenly skim over.

### Stage 3: Collecting Information

There are a number of questions you should be asking yourself before starting this:

1. What information do you need?
2. What information do you already have? For example you may already have lecturer notes, results from a laboratory experiment or descriptions of your methods of data collection.
3. How much information do you need?
4. How will you collect it?
5. How will you organise it?

Make a list of what information you still need and how you are going to gather this. It's worth being familiar with the research resources available to you from the college library. They may be able to provide access to existing information on your chosen subject. Some students find a useful way of organising information and provoking ideas is to brainstorm these into a spider diagram or a mind map. You start with a central idea in the centre of the paper then branch out with associated ideas. See below for an example



## Stage 4: Structuring your report

As we have said at the beginning, the structure of your report is dependent on the type of report required. Always double check with your lecturer or placement supervisor, to find out precisely what your report should include.

A typical report will include:

- Title page
- Acknowledgements
- Contents
- Abstract or summary
- Introduction
- Methodology
- Results or findings
- Discussion
- Conclusion and recommendations
- References
- Appendices

### **Title Page**

This should include title of the report, the author name, unit heading, course and date

### **Acknowledgements**

You should acknowledge any help you have received in collecting information. This could include staff at a work placement, technicians, IT or Library staff, for example

### **Contents**

Number all your pages. You should list all the main sections of the report in sequence. There are tools within Microsoft word to help with this process. Ask for assistance with this if needed.

### **Abstract or Summary**

This should be a short paragraph summarising the main contents of the report. It should give a short statement of the main focus of the report, the methods used, conclusions reached and any recommendations. It should be concise, informative and independent of the report.

This section is often written after you have finished the report.

## **Introduction**

Gives the content and scope of the report, state your objectives, define any limits, outline your methodology and give a brief background on the report and any proposed developments. You could include any references to work already done on the topic. (E.g. surveys, other reports, books, journal articles, online resources )

## **Literature Review**

If not included in your introduction illustrate the breadth of your research with reference to any books journal articles, websites etc you have used to find evidence for your report.

## **Results/ Findings or Analysis**

This is the main body of the report

Give detailed clear information on any research conducted in a way that it could be replicated by someone else.

State the results of your research and also give some comment and opinion on the findings. Identify important issues and suggest possible explanation. Outline any problems encountered and try and present a balanced view.

Present your findings in as simple a way as possible. Tables, graphs, pie charts, diagrams are often a concise and easily understood way of presenting information. Make sure you label any illustrations appropriately so that anyone can understand what they represent.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

These could be split into two sections if preferred.

This section draws together the main issues. It should be focussed on the research you have conducted and not introduce any new information. Any conclusions drawn should be link to your research evidence.

## References

Should include all books, journal article, websites you have cited in the text of your report. These should be listed in alphabetical order by the author's surname.

The College uses the Harvard style of referencing which means listing them in alphabetical order of the authors' name. If unsure about how to do this there are guidance notes available in the college library or online [at http://www.west-lothian.ac.uk/library/referencing-skills](http://www.west-lothian.ac.uk/library/referencing-skills)

## Appendices

This contains additional information that you may have referred to in the text but not presented. You could include details of interview questions, statistical data or a glossary of terms used.

## Stage 5: Style of Writing

Your tutor will advise whether your report should be written in an 'active' or 'passive' voice.

The active voice reads: 'I recommend.....'

The passive voice reads: 'It is recommended that .....

Your writing should be formal and objective and avoid using overly complicated language. Avoid using unnecessary jargon and ensure abbreviations are standardised.

## Stage 6: Presentation

Present your information as clearly as possible. The following could help you produce an easily read report:

- Leave wide margins for feedback/comments from your lecturer.
- Paragraphs should be short and concise.
- Headings should be highlighted or underlines

- All diagrams and illustrations should be labelled and numbered.

## Stage 7: Redrafting and Checking

Before you hand in your final draft read it through again and ask yourself if your report really covers everything that was asked for! Do you answer the question/fulfil the brief? It sometimes a good idea to stand back from your essay for a day or so, then read over it again before you hand it in. This should allow you a more objective opinion on what you have written and an opportunity to make some changes if needed.

### Summary

Planning is a critical part of report writing. Taking the time to stop and think through all aspects of your research and written report should result in a better finished item and hence better grades. The skills gained throughout the whole research process should also prove invaluable throughout the rest of your career.

## Report Writing Checklist

### Checklist

Item	Done	Comments/additions
Report answers the question/meets the assignment		
The title indicates what the report is about		
The abstract/summary is concise and accurately reflects what the research is about		
All sections are included and clearly labelled and numbered		
All materials are in the right sections		
Contents page is complete, accurate, and includes page numbers.		
Introduction is succinct and covers all sections in brief		
Literature review demonstrates breadth, depth and relevance of previous research		

Research methodology is clearly written and explains in detail methods used ( Anyone should be able to repeat your research)		
Results/findings presented clearly and accurately. Any graphs or tables are clearly labelled and explained. State whether they support your hypothesis /ideas or not		
Conclusions reflect results of your research		
Writing style is fit for purpose		
It meets the word limit		
Citations and references are complete and accurate		
Appendices are numbered		
Carefully proof – read		
All necessary cover sheets are complete and include your name course dates		

### Reference List

*Oxford English Dictionary* (2008) 8<sup>th</sup> ed. Oxford: Clarendon, p345.

### Further Reading

Cottrell, S. (2013) *The Study Skills Handbook*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke. Found on Library Shelves at 378.17

This guide has been produced with the help of ELRA.