
Writing for work documents

Written communications in the work environment are often compiled using existing templates that guide you through most of the information that is required.

Nonetheless, there are times when you need to be creative and write explanatory or descriptive notes about events, people or actions. In such cases, there are some important considerations.

Keep it factual and relevant

First and foremost, the information should be written in a **factual** and **objective** manner.

Note the following:

- Each fact or claim in your written communication should be able to be supported.
- Hearsay and personal opinions do not represent facts.
- If you form an opinion after you have analysed all the facts, then present it as your opinion or as a recommendation.
- Reports should not reflect personal interests or bias, feelings or emotions.
- Treat each event, person and action dispassionately.
- Information that may be very interesting but that is irrelevant to the issue should be omitted.

Clarity for the reader

The written document must be **unambiguous** so that there is little chance of the reader misunderstanding what you want to convey.

Ensure the document **does not make** too many **assumptions** – there may be pertinent information that you know about but that the reader is unlikely to be aware of.

Use plain English

There are whole courses on writing in plain English but here we give you just a summary of some key points.

- Use appropriate vocabulary for the audience (avoid technical terms or jargon that is not commonly understood).
- Do not use 'colourful' language such as 'a stupid act' or 'an idiotic assumption'.
- Do not use discriminatory or derogatory language or stereotyping.
- Avoid complicated structure and unusual or ambiguous words. Keep your language neutral to allow the reader to focus on the facts.
- Use the appropriate tone (for example: formal, informal, polite, friendly, arrogant, angry, sarcastic, sincere etc) – some of these should probably never be used in work situation!
- Write consistently in either an active or a passive voice. It may be appropriate to write in the first person (eg, I or we informed the manager ...). However, more formal communications would generally be written in the third person (eg, the manager was informed ...).
- Plan your writing by listing the key points first. Write a draft and then edit it to express the message clearly and concisely. You might find reading it aloud will help you to check whether it is easily understood and the tone is appropriate.
- If it is a fairly long piece of writing, use headings, subheadings or numbered points for clarity.
- Arrange ideas in a logical sequence. This can vary depending on the topic and the background information.
- Your writing must always be grammatically correct and free of spelling mistakes. If you are unsure, ask someone else to proof-read it for you.

Brief overview of report writing

Reports are usually written in **formal**, business **language** rather than in colloquial or informal language.

Reports are structured and presented in a particular format. In some organisations, there is a 'house' style for reports.

The **standard structure** will include all or most of the following:

- Title (simple but meaningful)
- Contents page
- Summary or abstract (see *Note 1* below)

- Introduction or Terms of Reference (see *Note 2* below)
- Body of the report (see *Note 3* below)
- Conclusion
- Recommendations
- References
- Appendices (if appropriate)

Note 1: The summary (or abstract) is written last, but presented at the beginning. It contains comments on the main areas of the report, general conclusions and recommendations. It is generally no longer than half to one page in length.

Note 2: Terms of Reference should be set out with the exact wording and structure of the original report request document. If there are no written Terms of Reference, then the introduction will detail who requested the report, its precise purpose and subject, and its limits.

Note 3: The body of the report will vary depending upon the subject matter, but it will be structured for a logical flow from beginning to end. As a general rule, the body of the report will contain background information, research or investigation activities undertaken, outcomes of such activities, arguments or discussion about the results obtained, diagrams or charts as appropriate.

Brief overview of discussion papers

As the name suggests, a discussion paper provides information in advance of a meeting to support the subsequent discussion of a topic. The language of a discussion paper will probably be less formal than for a report. Its main aim is to enhance the actual discussion by giving participants the opportunity to review pertinent information and perspectives beforehand and to prepare their own thoughts and suggestions. Such a paper may be in the form of a memorandum or a simple dot-point document. It would generally cover all or some of the following.

Introduction

- Subject (reason for the document)
- Name of person who developed the paper
- List of the recipients – expected participants in the ensuing discussion
- Date of meeting at which it will be discussed (if available)

Body

- Brief overview of the issue/topic – setting the scene – including relevant background
- Concepts, theories, models, examples, etc, that may assist
- Current status or procedure (reference to documentation if relevant)
- What the discussion might hope to achieve (non-specific outcomes)

Closing comments

- A request for recipients to review the paper, make some notes and prepare their thoughts and recommendations

Writing your assessment tasks

As you embark upon this course of study, you may find the content new and stimulating. You may see ways to apply what you are learning directly in your workplace. You may find satisfaction in discovering that the study materials reinforce what you are already doing. In a practical sense, the learning and new ideas from this course of study may fulfill your personal and workplace needs.

BUT – there comes the time when you have to put pen to paper (or rather ‘fingers to keyboard’) and respond to the assessment tasks, in order to demonstrate to your assessor that you have acquired the underpinning knowledge and skills and can demonstrate how you apply those skills.

This may not be as daunting as you think. Consider the following points.

- First, read the assessment tasks very carefully and make sure you are clear about what is being asked of you. Note the **key words** (task requirements) and the key action verbs (eg *discuss, list, explain, analyse*, etc) – and write your response accordingly. Check whether a **format** has been specified; for example, are you asked for a report, a discussion paper, a table, a diagram, a draft policy, a list? If so, present your response in the appropriate manner.
- Develop a brief outline of what your answer will cover, relating it to what you have been reading, and what you do in practice.
- Expand on your outline, ensuring your work is relevant, logical, technically correct (if appropriate), unambiguous and complete. To achieve this you may need to re-read the study notes, the supplied readings, or visit recommended websites for more information. You may also be able to source information from your workplace (provided you have approval and there is no risk of breaching confidentiality where sensitive information is concerned).

- No matter where you source information, you must make sure that there is no risk of plagiarism. Plagiarism is the use of someone else's work without acknowledgement and is considered dishonest and improper conduct that, if proven, is dealt with harshly by UNE Partnerships. Acknowledging your sources is achieved by **referencing**, an important academic convention (see details below).
- Read through your work as if you were the assessor. Have you actually answered the whole question? Have you made certain assumptions about the reader's knowledge?
- Once you are satisfied with the content, check it for structure. Is the flow logical? Does it have a beginning (introduction), a middle (the essence of your response) and an ending (a conclusion)?
- Next, consider your writing style. Are sentences clear and concise? Have you used inappropriate language (for example, slang, sexist terms, acronyms that are not explained)? Is your tone friendly? Are technical terms fully explained?
- Finally, check it for grammar and spelling. Have someone else read it for you as well.

Referencing

It is essential to provide a reference for all information/data/facts taken from another source. This includes:

- paraphrasing (expressing another's ideas in your own words)
- summarising (writing a short version of someone else's ideas)
- quotes (using another's exact words, tables or figures)

NB: If you use a direct quote, it must be written exactly as the original.

Throughout UNE Partnerships' course materials, the Harvard, or author-date, referencing system is used.

In the body of the notes, the reference is placed in brackets next to the relevant text and shows the author's surname, year of publication, and page number (when appropriate*) as follows:

This is a sample of how to use a reference in text (Katzenbach & Smith 2009, p1).

**Page numbers must be provided for a passage, table or figure, but are not necessary when reference is made to key ideas from the work as a whole.*

At the end of the document all references are set out in alphabetical order in full, and in a particular sequence. The presentation varies slightly depending on whether the source is a book, a journal or magazine article, a website, a newspaper, as shown in the following examples.

BOOK

For example, for a text book the sequence is: author's surname, initials, year of publication, publication title [in italics], publisher's name, place of publication, as shown here:

Katzenbach, J. R. & Smith, D. K. 2009, *The Wisdom of Teams: Creating the High-Performance Organization*, Harvard Business School Press, Boston USA.

Other sources such as journals, magazines, newspapers etc, have slightly different presentations as shown below.

JOURNAL ARTICLE

Amer, T. S. 2008, 'Making small business planning easier', *Journal of Accountancy*, Vol. 170, no.1, pp53–60

NEWSPAPER ARTICLE

Armitage, C. 2008, Management problems are returning, *The Australian*, 24 November, p23.

WEB SITE

Austrade 2010, *Business assets*, www.dfat.gov.au/bus.brief.html, viewed 20 March 2011

For more details see:

Commonwealth of Australia 2002, *Style Manual*, John Wiley & Sons Australia, Ltd