REPORT WRITING
A KEY SKILL TO MASTER IN ESP
AT ACADEMIC LEVELS

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Abstract

Academic assignments require reports rather than essays and students become confused about the layout and the specific ways to prioritise information in them. In business as well, when faced with a request for a report to a manager, employees struggle to identify what to write. Confusion arises about the writing style, the items to include, the language to use, the length of the document and organising the relevant data. Drafting reports is a basic academic skill in great demand in business, technical and scientific jobs; hence the students who possess it enjoy higher employability prospects.

Key words: reports, academic writing skills, assessment rubrics, increasing students' employability

Reports focus on facts, unlike essays which present arguments and reasoning. Both writing skills are paramount for academic success and seem to have exploded as homework assignments in pandemic times when students as well as professors struggle (and many times fail, unfortunately) to timely adjust to online interactive teaching and sustainable learning. Facing such challenges myself, in this article I am trying to share didactic experience and certain best practice items in order to clarify strategies and evaluation steps for proficient writing achievement, to benefit all our students.

The first methodological step in guiding learners through report drafting is to discriminate among the writing typologies, the process, the resources and the communication to the readership, with a focus on the research process mainly, as seen in the illustrations below.

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Fig. 1. Writing types, process, resources, readership and research steps, cf. www.owl.purdue.edu

By definition, the report is a brief, sharp, concise document drafted for particular targets and readerships. It generally presents and analyses a situation/issue, making recommendations for future action. It is a factual paper, and needs to be clear and well-structured. Instructions for the explicit form and content of reports vary among lines of work, organisations, departments, academic courses, from tutor to tutor, as well as between subjects, so specific guidelines are needed.

Hence, reports contain the following elements:

- A description of a sequence of events or a situation;
- Interpretation of the significance of such events/situations, (the author's own analysis or information from views of other specialists, carefully referenced);
- Evaluation of the facts/results of that piece of research;
- Discussion of the probable outcomes of future courses of action;
- Recommendations regarding a prospective strategy;
- Conclusions.

In time, all positions have developed adapted templates for the specific job description, and standard guidelines to structure what the employee needs to express. As a result, many government departments have outlined structures for reports to ministers that must be followed exactly.

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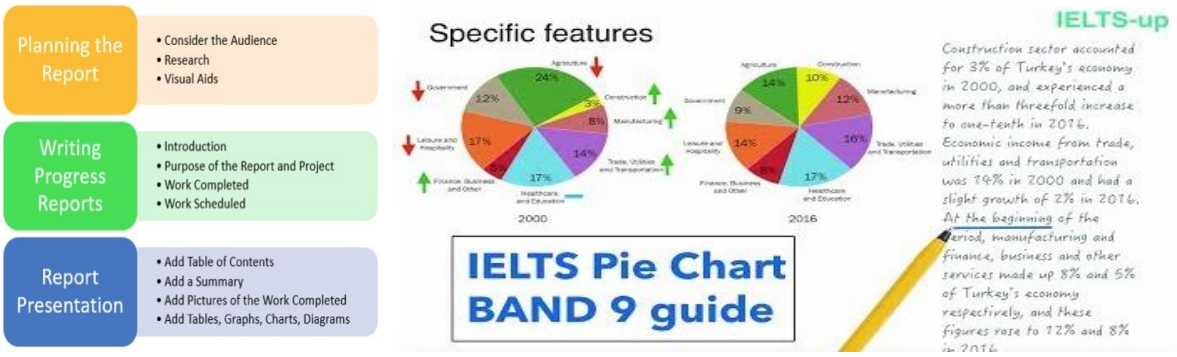


Fig. 2. Report writing stages, correlated with IELTS band 9 guides, cf www.cambridge.org

A report is designed to lead people through the information in a structured way, in such a way as to enable them to find the data that they require quickly and easily. Therefore reports have numbered sections and subsections, alongside with a clear and comprehensive contents page listing each heading; hence page & subheadings numbering is important. Modern word processors provide features to add tables of contents and page numbers as well as styled headings; students should be taught exactly how they should take advantage of these facilities, since they update automatically as you the author is writing the report, moving, adding or deleting sections.

Successful report drafting requires prior preparation & planning. The structure transparently leads the reader through the demonstration to a course of action or decision. The student/employee will usually receive a clear brief for a report, including what is being studied and whom it is for. Clarify the reasons for writing it, as well as what the reader should do at the end of reading: make a decision or agree a recommendation, perhaps. Throughout planning and writing, ensure focus on the final aim, which may require a clear cold mind in analysing issues. Irrelevant items are discarded. As reading and research unfold, the draft is organised into sections by theme, keeping track of all references, especially for academic work. Referencing may be less important in the workplace, but it is important to be able to substantiate any assertions made in writing and indicate all data sources. Structure layouts for the precise content vary, but all include an executive summary, introduction, the main body of the report, and a section containing conclusions and specialised recommendations. The executive summary or abstract for a scientific report, (half a page to a page in length), is a brief summary of the contents. It should be drafted last, when the key points to dwell on are clear. It is meant to give busy executives a quick content outline. The introduction sets out the demonstration plan and provides a brief summary of the problem under discussion. It should also briefly envisage the conclusions. The main body of the report is carefully structured to lead the reader through the issue. It should be split it into sections using numbered sub-headings relating to themes or areas for consideration. For each theme the main idea on debate and any areas of difficulty or disagreement

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are set out clearly and concisely. Experimental results may also be included. All information dealt with need to be related back to the brief and the precise subject under discussion. If it is not relevant, it is left out. The conclusion includes no new data and displays the inferences drawn from existing information, including any experimental results. It may include recommendations, or these may be included in a separate section. Recommendations suggest how the specialist author thinks the situation could be improved; they are specific, achievable and measurable. If recommendations have financial implications, they should be set out clearly, with estimated costs, if possible.

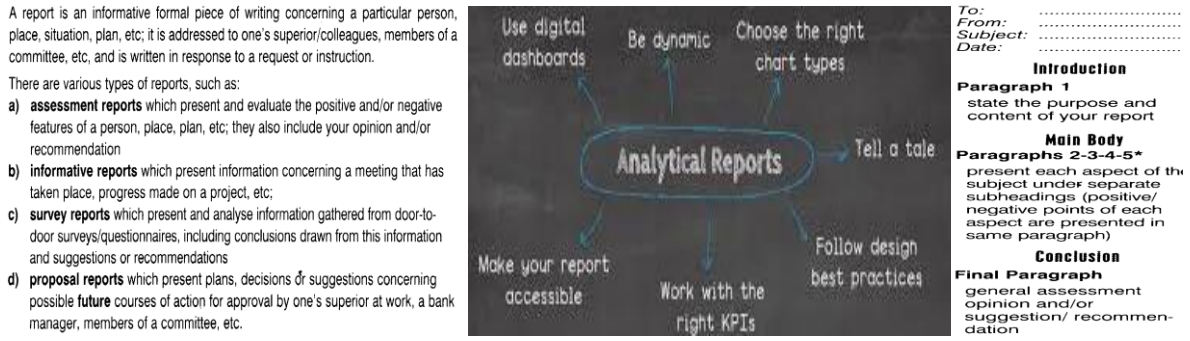


Fig. 3. Types of reports, cf. Virginia Evans Successful Writing Proficiency, Express Publishing 2000, p. 120

The writing style of reports is comprehensible, impersonal, formal and exact, to match its clear aim; the text is precise, in plain English, with short words and sentences. Ultimately it must be easy to read and understand, even to the readership with little know-how of the subject area. Jargon is used only with specialist audiences otherwise the specialist language should be explained as it is being used. If more than five words require explanations, then probably there is too much jargon that needs replacing with synonyms. As with any academic assignment or formal writing, such work will benefit from being read over and over again, and ruthlessly edited for sense and style.

Particular attention focuses on the level of relevance of all the information included. Verb tenses, impersonal address and passives, grammar and spelling should be adequate.

Data must be fully & correctly referenced without plagiarism. Frequently used verbs include: analyze**,** describe, discuss, examine, explain, identify, illustrate, outline, review, and summarize.

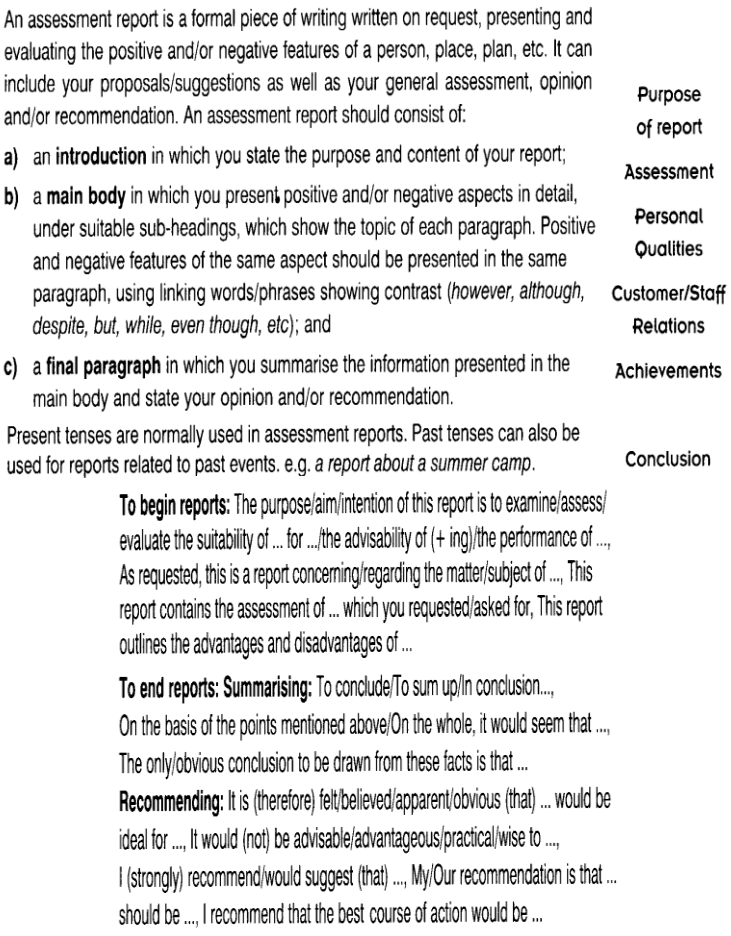
In addition, here follows a table of thinking words compiled during online seminars with undergraduates and master program students, for adequate use in completing report writing tasks:

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Knowledge	**Comprehension**	**Application**	**Analysis**	**Synthesis**	**Evaluation**
define	convert	change	analyze	categorize	appraise
describe	defend	compute	break down	combine	conclude
identify	distinguish	construct	categorize	compile	criticize
label	estimate	demonstrate	compare	compose	critique
list	explain	manipulate	diagram	create	defend
match	generalize	modify	differentiate	devise	evaluate
outline	give an example	operate	distinguish	design	interpret
recall	infer	produce	divide	generate	judge
recognize	interpret	relate	illustrate	organize	justify
retell	paraphrase	show	infer	plan	rate
select	predict	solve	relate	revise	summarize
state	summarize	use	separate	write	support

The following information was provided to students, in order to elaborate academic reports on given templates; the excerpts are selected from Virginia Evans, Successful writing, Proficiency.

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An assessment report is a formal piece of writing written on request, presenting and evaluating the positive and/or negative features of a person, place, plan, etc. It can include your proposals/suggestions as well as your general assessment, opinion and/or recommendation. An assessment report should consist of:

a) an **introduction** in which you state the purpose and content of your report;

b) a **main body** in which you present positive and/or negative aspects in detail, under suitable sub-headings, which show the topic of each paragraph. Positive and negative features of the same aspect should be presented in the same paragraph, using linking words/phrases showing contrast (*however, although, despite, but, while, even though, etc*); and

c) a **final paragraph** in which you summarise the information presented in the main body and state your opinion and/or recommendation.

Present tenses are normally used in assessment reports. Past tenses can also be used for reports related to past events. e.g. *a report about a summer camp*.

Purpose of report

Assessment

Personal Qualities

Customer/Staff Relations

Achievements

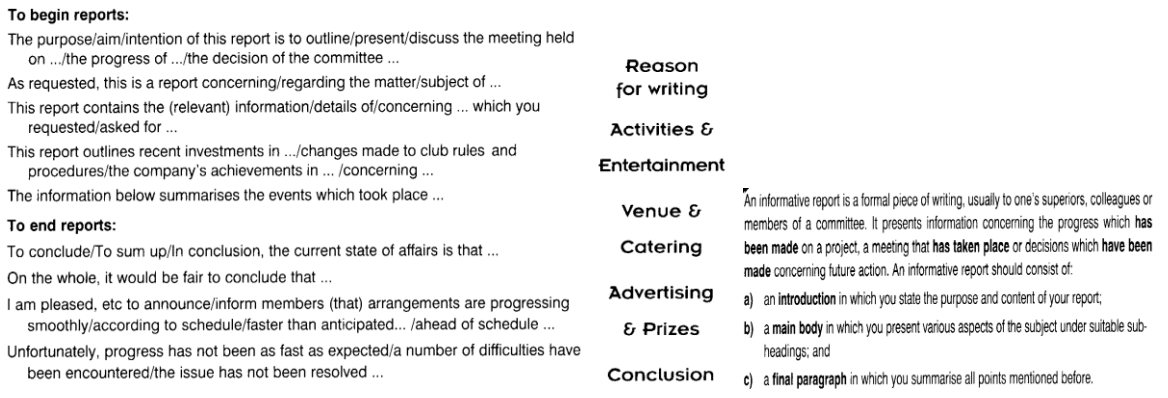
Conclusion

To begin reports: The purpose/aim/intention of this report is to examine/assess/evaluate the suitability of ... for .../the advisability of (+ ing)/the performance of ..., As requested, this is a report concerning/regarding the matter/subject of ..., This report contains the assessment of ... which you requested/asked for, This report outlines the advantages and disadvantages of ...

To end reports: Summarising: To conclude/To sum up/In conclusion..., On the basis of the points mentioned above/On the whole, it would seem that ..., The only/obvious conclusion to be drawn from these facts is that ...

Recommending: It is (therefore) felt/believed/apparent/obvious (that) ... would be ideal for ..., It would (not) be advisable/advantageous/practical/wise to ..., I (strongly) recommend/would suggest (that) ..., My/Our recommendation is that ... should be ..., I recommend that the best course of action would be ...

Fig. 4. Assessment reports, cf V. Evans Successful Writing Proficiency, Express Publishing 2000, p. 122



To begin reports:

The purpose/aim/intention of this report is to outline/present/discuss the meeting held on .../the progress of .../the decision of the committee ...

As requested, this is a report concerning/regarding the matter/subject of ...

This report contains the (relevant) information/details of/concerning ... which you requested/asked for ...

This report outlines recent investments in .../changes made to club rules and procedures/the company's achievements in ... /concerning ...

The information below summarises the events which took place ...

To end reports:

To conclude/To sum up/In conclusion, the current state of affairs is that ...

On the whole, it would be fair to conclude that ...

I am pleased, etc to announce/inform members (that) arrangements are progressing smoothly/according to schedule/faster than anticipated... /ahead of schedule ...

Unfortunately, progress has not been as fast as expected/a number of difficulties have been encountered/the issue has not been resolved ...

Reason for writing

Activities & Entertainment

Venue & Catering

Advertising & Prizes

Conclusion

An informative report is a formal piece of writing, usually to one's superiors, colleagues or members of a committee. It presents information concerning the progress which **has been made** on a project, a meeting that **has taken place** or decisions which **have been made** concerning future action. An informative report should consist of:

a) an **introduction** in which you state the purpose and content of your report;

b) a **main body** in which you present various aspects of the subject under suitable sub-headings; and

c) a **final paragraph** in which you summarise all points mentioned before.

Fig. 5. Informative reports, cf V. Evans Successful Writing Proficiency, Express Publishing 2000, p. 126

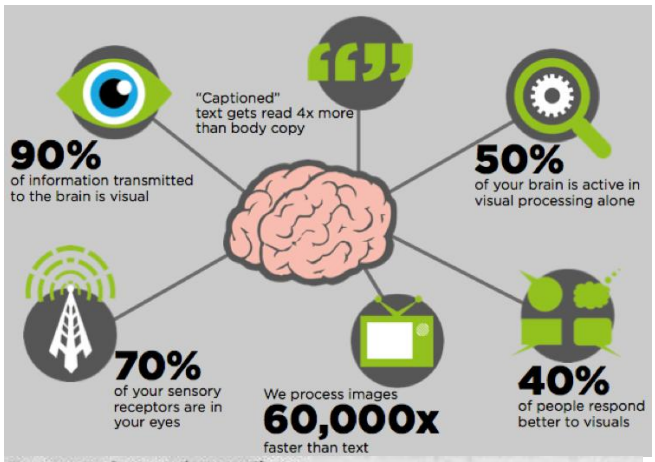
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A survey report is a formal piece of writing presenting and analysing the results/findings of research concerning reactions to a product, plan, etc, including general assessment, conclusions and/or recommendation(s).

The information presented may have been gathered in a survey/opinion poll or compiled from official statistical data, and may reflect the opinions/preferences, etc of the general public, a particular group of people, a random sample of the population, etc. The information may be presented in the form of **facts *(numbers, percentages and proportions)***, or **generalisations *(This indicates/ suggests/ implies that ...)***. *e.g. Fifty-five per cent of young people go to the cinema at least twice a month. (fact) This indicates that the cinema is still quite a popular form of entertainment among young people. (generalisation)*
Use expressions such as: *one in ten, two out of five, twenty per cent of the people questioned, a large proportion*, etc. as well as verbs such as: *agree, claim, state*
Present tenses are normally used to present generalisations.

To begin reports:
The purpose/aim/intention of this report is to examine/assess/evaluate the results of a survey in which ... people/residents/viewers were asked about/whether/what ...
This report outlines the results of a survey conducted/carried out to determine/discover the reaction/popularity/attitudes/opinion of ...
As requested, this survey report contains information compiled from ...
The data included in this report was gathered/obtained by means of a questionnaire/a telephone survey/door-to-door interviews ...
The information below summarises statistics compiled by ...

To end reports:
To conclude/To sum up/In conclusion, the survey clearly shows ..., On the basis of these findings, it would seem that ..., The results of this survey suggest/indicate/demonstrate/reveal that ..., etc.



To express facts and proportions:

Of the 460 people/students/workers who, etc, were questioned/interviewed /asked ...

Ten/fifty-six, etc, per cent	of people/consumers, etc	were of the opinion ...
The majority/minority	of viewers/etc	felt/believed that ...
A significant percentage	of those who responded	expressed (dis)approval of
A large/small proportion	of people surveyed	replied/reported that ...
Over one third/half	of those interviewed	chose/preferred ...

To express generalisations:

On the whole/Mainly/In general terms/Generally speaking, ...

Most consumers prefer ... ,	which is shown/illustrated	by the fact that ...
It is generally felt that ... ,	as proved/demonstrated	
Few people approve of ... ,	as confirmed/emphasised	

This fact suggests/implies/indicates that the average person chooses ...

Depending on their position, facts and generalisations can be linked by using verbs either in their active or passive form as in the examples:

Fig. 6. Survey reports and vocabulary,

cf V. Evans Successful Writing Proficiency, Express Publishing 2000, p. 128

A proposal report is a formal, informative piece of writing which outlines plans and/or suggestions for a future course of action, and is submitted for approval by a bank manager, superiors at work, a business customer, relevant authorities, etc.

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To begin a proposal report:

The purpose/aim/intention of this report is to outline/present/discuss the future plans/the intended course of action...

This report is submitted in support of our request for approval of .../ for permission tc .../for a loan to allow us to ...

This report contains the (relevant) information/details of/concerning ... which you requested/asked for

This report contains details of/outlines our plans/intentions concerning ...

To end a proposal report:

To conclude/To sum up/In conclusion, our intention is to ...

The advantage(s) of the approach proposed would be that ...

I feel certain/believe that the course of action proposed above will achieve .../meet with success/answer the needs of the company.

I hope/trust that the plan/scheme outlined/presented in this report meets with your approval/will receive your serious consideration.

Fig. 7. Proposal reports, cf V. Evans Successful Writing Proficiency, Express Publishing 2000, p. 132

Relying on this didactic input, the following algorithm was derived for student report writing, which generally involves presenting the investigation &analysis of information/issue recommending actions and making proposals. It was then applied to different types of reports, including business, scientific and research ones; the basic steps in devising them are the same, as outlined below:

Step 1: Decide on the terms of reference

Step 2: Decide on the procedure

Step 3: Find the information

Step 4: Decide on the structure and plan

Step 5: Draft the first part of the report

Step 6: Analyse findings and draw conclusions

Step 7: Make recommendations

Step 8: Draft the executive summary and table of contents

Step 9: Compile a reference list

Step 10: Revise the draft report

Details for Step 1: Decide on the terms of reference

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To decide on the terms of reference for the report, read the instructions and any other information given about the report, and think about the purpose of the report assisted by the following questions:

- What is it about?
- What exactly is needed?
- Why is it needed?
- When do I need to do it?
- Who is it for, or who is it aimed at?

This will help with drafting the terms of reference.

Details for Step 2: Decide on the procedure

This means planning the investigation or research, and how to write the report. Ask these questions:

- What information is needed?
- Is any background reading required?
- What articles or documents are necessary?
- Is it good to contact the library for assistance?
- Is it beneficial to interview or observe people?
- Is recording data necessary?
- How to proceed?

Answering such questions will help with drafting the procedure section of the report, which outlines the steps taken to carry out the investigation.

Details for Step 3: Find the information

The next step is finding information needed in the report. To do this, read written material, observe people/activities, and/or talk to people. Make sure the information selected is relevant and adequate. Check the assessment requirements, guidelines, marking schemes and deadlines to ensure the right track. This is the basis, or main body, of the report – the findings.

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Details for Step 4: Decide on the structure

Reports generally have a similar structure, but certain details differ, depending on:

- The type of report (research report, laboratory report, business report, investigative report, etc.)
- How formal the report has to be. • The length of the report.

Depending on the type of report, the structure can include:

- A title page.
- Executive summary.
- Contents.
- An introduction.
- Terms of reference.
- Procedure.
- Findings.
- Conclusions.
- Recommendations.
- References/Bibliography.
- Appendices.

The sections of a report have headings and subheadings, which are usually numbered.

Details for Step 5: Draft the first part of your report

Once the structure is established, write down the headings and start to fill these in with the data gathered so far. Draft the terms of reference, procedure and findings, and start to work out what will be included in the report appendix. The findings are result of reading, observations, interviews and investigation. They form the basis of the report. Depending on the report type, photos, tables or graphs may also be inserted to make it more readable and/or easier to follow. While writing the draft, decide what will go in the appendix; it is knowledge too long to include in the body of the

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report, or supplements/complements to the data just given: brochures, large tables, or spreadsheets.

Details for Step 6: Analyse your findings and draw conclusions

The conclusion is where findings are analysed and interpreted; to do it, read the findings and ask:

- What has been found?
- What is significant or important about such findings?
- What do these findings suggest?

For example, the conclusion may describe how the data collected explain why the situation occurred, what this means for the organisation, and what will happen if the situation continues or not. New information is never included in the conclusion.

Details for Step 7: Make recommendations

Recommendations are the solution to the problem and/or what is expected to happen next.

To help decide what to recommend:

- Reread the findings and conclusions.
- Consider what the report recipient should to do or not do; what actions should they carry out?
- Check that the recommendations are practical and are based logically on the conclusions.
- Include enough detail for the reader to know what needs to be done and who should do it.

Recommendations should be written as a numbered list, and ordered from most to least important.

Details for Step 8: Draft the executive summary and table of contents

Some reports require an executive summary and/or list of contents. Even though these two sections come near the beginning of the report they cannot be done before finishing it, with structure and recommendations finalised. An executive summary is approximately 100 words long. It tells the readers what the report is about, and summarises the recommendations.

Details for Step 9: Compile a reference list

This is a list of all the sources referred to in the report and uses APA referencing.

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Details for Step 10: Revise the draft report

It is always important to revise own work. Things to check include:

• If it answers the requirement (assignment question, the instructions/guidelines, marking, schedule)

• If the required sections are included, and are in the correct order.

• If the information is accurate, with no gaps.

• If the argument is logical and the given information support conclusions and recommendations

• If all terms, symbols and abbreviations used in the text have been explained.

• If any diagrams, tables, graphs and illustrations are numbered and labelled.

• If the formatting is correct, including numbering, and headings, consistent throughout the report.

• If the report reads well, and the text is as clear and effective as possible.

One might need to prepare several drafts. If possible, get others to check report.

Next in my didactic approach to report writing in academic ESP environments (ESP is English for Specific Purposes, specialized domains such as business, engineering, medicine, etc) I discuss report writing in International English Exams: IELTS, TOEFL, CAE, in case the students should seek further certification of their foreign language skills. Briefly, the report written in such tests is the presentation of an event/situation/issue with information that an intended readership needs to have, in a limited number of words. Hence a report is usually drafted by people who have examined a particular situation/problem. It may be addressed to a superior (manager, team leader, project coordinator, top executive) or a peer group (club members, colleagues) or an organization. The content of any report is to some extent factual and draws on the prompt material, but using own ideas and experience is required. Imagination is needed, as the task demands more than describing a situation; it can require evaluating to what extent a particular aim has been achieved, or to suggest an alternative course of action. The exam instructions should be carefully studied, and identifying the key words is crucial, as they indicate what things to dwell on in the report, as well as the number of paragraphs and their focus. Depending on the intended readership, a decision is made as to the kind of style/register, the features of the current situation and the source of information regarding it. Reports should be visually different from essays. Typically they are organized in sections with

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headings and bullet points/numbered lists to make it easier for the reader to find information quickly.

Here is the recommended language for CAE Report Writing Tasks:

- Stating the purpose/goal of the report in the introduction

The aim/purpose of this report is to describe/evaluate/present… In this report, I describe/present/ evaluate…This report provides a description/evaluation/presentation… The objective of this report is to compare ….. and ….. The purpose of this report is to examine / evaluate / explain / describe / analyse / present / outline… This report aims to…

- Describing how information was obtained

I spoke to/interviewed several members of staff…Members of the local police force answered a questionnaire…I visited three locations:… I conducted a survey among college graduates… It is based on a survey conducted among… It is the result of a discussion which took place among…

- Reporting results

Most people said/expressed the opinion that …According to …A high/small/significant proportion of those surveyed/respondents said that… 25% of the students… A small number felt that …

- Presenting a list

The points in favour/against introducing genetically modified foods can be summarized as follows 1…2… There are a number of ways in which facilities for … could be improved: first… next…The first observation to make concerns… Furthermore/Moreover/In fact/Lastly/Finally/It has been said that… According to (the majority of respondents)… In spite of (the fact that)… Despite (the fact that)… The outlook for …… is (far from) bright/optimistic/depressing/daunting The future looks bleak/remains uncertain/is promising This seems unlikely in the near/foreseeable future

- Making a recommendation

In the light of the results of the survey/questionnaire the introduction of a small fee would seem to be the best choice/option/solution. I would recommend, therefore, the purchase of more computers My recommendations are as follows: …I would strongly advise that… The following measures should be implemented:.. In the light of the results of the survey I would advise against… Given the results of the survey, I would advise for… I feel it would be to our advantage if… The best solution would be to… In order to improve …… it is necessary to.. This will have an impact on ….

- Conclusion

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Provided that these recommendations are taken into consideration,… In conclusion,… All in all, From the research one can conclude that…All things considered…

Here follows the CAE Report Marking Scheme cf. www.cambridge.org, which I used with my students, in conjunction with the report writing process flowchart and the assessment criteria below, and the results are promising.

Language

It is necessary to properly and precisely use a **wide array of words** and expressions, including rarely used ones. The text should include both simple and complex grammar expressions.

The **vocabulary** also has to be **rich and diverse.**

Communication

It is necessary to maintain the convention of a report or essay in English, such as **clear division into paragraphs, headings, bullet points**.

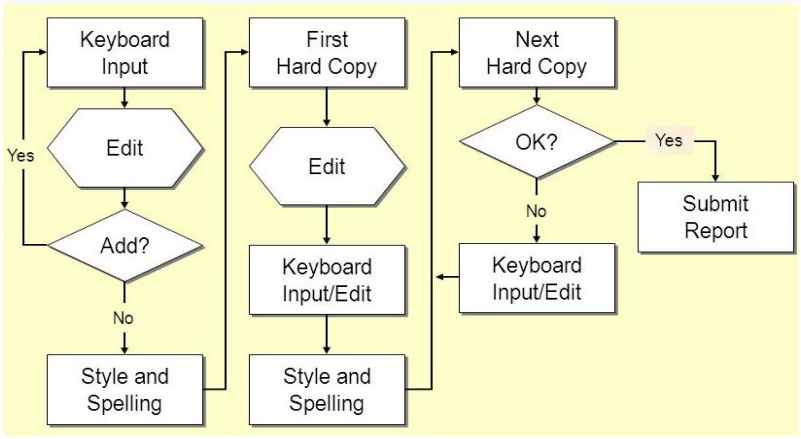
The text should be easy to understand for the target reader.

Organization

The text should be consistent and very well organized using a wide array of copulas and internal references.

Content

Every sentence in the text should refer to the **topic** of the assignment, and all the tasks specified in it should be **fulfilled**.



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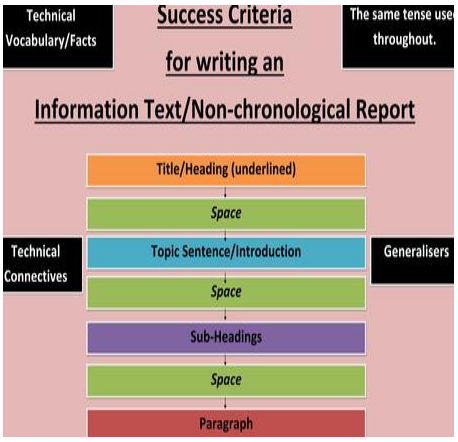


Fig. 8 Flowchart of the report writing process with success criteria to assess it,

cf. Business Communication Essentials, Prentice Hall 200, pp. 11 and 38

In conclusion, academic assignments require reports rather than essays and students become confused about the layout and the specific ways to prioritise information in them. In business as well, when faced with a request for a report to a manager, employees struggle to identify what to write. Confusion arises about the writing style, the items to include, the language to use, the length of the document and organising the relevant data. Drafting reports is a basic academic skill in great demand in business, technical and scientific jobs; hence the students who possess it enjoy higher employability prospects.

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