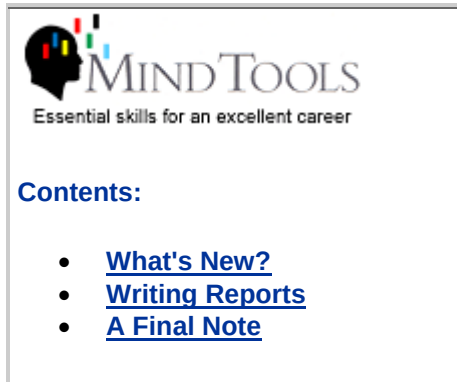


Get Your Views Respected!

Mind Tools Newsletter 121 - March 3rd, 2009

You have received this newsletter because you have subscribed to it using our double opt-in sign-up process. To unsubscribe, just click the link at the bottom of this email.

Welcome to our March 3rd Newsletter!



When you have to write your quarterly management update report, how do you approach it? Do you stick the information in 'any old how', and hope for the best? Do you summarize and analyze? Do you include every painstaking detail? Or does fear of the blank page leave you procrastinating, and then rushing to finish it at the last minute?

What's New?

If you recognize your report writing dilemmas here, then you'll be relieved to know that there's a standard approach that takes the headache out of report writing, and helps you get your views

respected!

Our article [Writing Reports](#) outlines the Business Report Format, which gives you an eight-point guide to writing and structuring your reports in a way that helps you organize your ideas effectively and helps you win the respect of the people you're seeking to influence. Now all you need to do is ensure that everyone else in your team uses the same method, so that reading reports becomes more of a delight, and less of a chore!

Our second article is a "featured favorite" of Mind Tools readers, and helps you test your all-important ability to motivate others. So "How Good Are Your Motivation Skills?" Find out by [taking the test online!](#)

And, if you're in HR or you're a manager responsible for training your team, could we please ask you to spare 3 minutes to help us with some market research? (In time, we hope this will help us bring even more of the benefits of Mind Tools to you, your team and your organization.) Just click [here](#) or visit <http://www.mindtools.com/survey> to let us know what you think!

Thank you, and best wishes!



James Manktelow



Rachel Thompson

P.S. Do you know someone else who'd enjoy this newsletter? Why not email a link to them today? Simply click [here](#) for a pre-formatted email, ready for you to send.

Editors' Choice Article:

Writing Reports

Using the Business Report Format

Imagine this scenario: You're a busy, upper-level manager, and you supervise several junior managers. Every quarter, each member of your managerial team has to give you a written report on his or her department's progress. This report details profits, costs, productivity, and recommendations for the next quarter.

Reading all of these reports takes days, but what's even more frustrating is that they're all completely different. Some of your managers put the data and statistics right at the beginning, while others use appendices at the end. Some don't include an executive summary, or a section with details about recommendations for the next quarter. This means you have to spend extra time trawling through each report to find the information you really need.



Keep reports concise by following a standard format.

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How can you reduce the time you spend looking through all of these reports for important information? And how can you make sure that the reports you submit are read, digested, and understood? After all, readers will probably find what they need in half the time if everyone followed the same format.

This is why a standard format - often called the Business Report Format - has been developed over the years. In this article, we discuss why it's helpful to use this standard format, and then we'll outline what the format is.

Why the Format Is Important

One of the most important reasons to follow a standard Business Report Format is that people reading your report don't usually have a lot of time. Very few, if any, will read every word of your report from start to finish. However, using a clear, standard format allows readers to find the information they need quickly and easily - and skip what they don't need.

Following a standard format also helps you organize all the relevant information. The content of a report can be overwhelming, especially when you have a lot of data. This format ensures that your information follows logical steps that readers will be able to follow and understand easily. You're less likely to forget anything either, because the format gives you the structure you need to argue your case coherently.

The Business Report Format

Here are the main components of this standard format:

1. **Title Page (or Title Section)**

Include the report name, author name, and date. If your report is quite long, your title section could also include a table of contents.

2. **Executive Summary**

Keep this to a maximum of one page. Summarize the problem you're trying to solve, list the most important information or results, and detail any action steps that you recommend.

For many people, this is the only page they'll have time to read. It's therefore a good idea to write it so that it argues your case in a standalone way. Use bullets and numbered lists to highlight important points.

3. **Methodology**

Describe the methods you used in your research to reach your conclusions. For example, did you talk with focus groups, conduct interviews, search the company archives, or use outside resources like consulting or research firms? Include the details of your research process, and explain why you used the sources you did.

4. **Introduction**

Tell readers why they need to read this report, and give a very brief overview of what you're going to cover in the main body of the report.

5. **Main Body**

This is the 'heart' of your report. Present your research and make your case - and remember to put the most important information first.

6. **Conclusion**

Analyze the results of your research, and bring everything together. Many people will read this section, so keep it short and simple.

7. **Recommendations**

List the actions you think readers - or the company - should take to solve the problem you're addressing. Ideally, use bullets or numbered points for this list.

This is another highly read section, so be very clear about your opinion. You've done the research, so tell people what needs to happen next. If you suggest major changes, then create a strategy to implement these larger changes on a step-by-step basis.

8. **Appendix**

Include all of your sources and research information in detail. Few people read the appendix carefully, but this is the information that supports your arguments, so it must be included.

Report Tips

Here are some additional suggestions for writing effective, well-organized reports:

- **Understand your objectives:** Before you begin researching or writing, make sure you clearly understand why you're writing the report - and who will read it.
- **Use a relaxed style:** If possible, keep your writing style simple and easy to read. Be professional, but always keep your readers in mind. If you write the way you speak, they'll probably have an easier time understanding what you're trying to tell them.
- **Keep it concise:** Remember, people typically don't have much time. Aim to keep your sentences short and clear.
- **Use sources and data:** Use statistics, and quote sources whenever you can. People tend to trust numbers more than opinions.

- **Organize your text with clear headings:** Break up your text with headings and subheadings. This makes reading easier, and it allows people to find the information that's most relevant to them.
- **Start with the most important information:** In every section of your report, put the most important information first. Again, remember that most people don't have lots of time. Tell them what they need to know as quickly as possible.
- **Keep 'backup' information:** Once you've done your initial research, you'll probably have a lot more information than you really need. This means that you'll have to go through all that data to determine what needs to go in your report. Be careful not to 'cherry-pick' data: don't choose just what you like, or what supports your objective. Keep records of every piece of information you include (and what you don't include), just in case you're asked to defend your findings.
- **Do at least two drafts:** You can marshal your arguments in the first draft. In the second draft, you can refine and polish the way you've expressed them.

Key Points

Following a standard Business Report Format makes it easier for the people reading your report to find what they need quickly. They'll know which sections will answer their questions, and they'll clearly see your recommendations. For people who are in a hurry, this is an absolute necessity.

Mini-Survey: Please Help Us Help You and Your Team!

Do you enjoy reading our newsletter and articles? And are you in HR, or are you a manager responsible for training your team? If so, could you please spare 3 minutes to help us with some market research? (In time, we hope this will help us bring even more of the benefits of Mind Tools to you and your team.)

Please participate by clicking [here](#) or visiting <http://www.mindtools.com/survey> to answer our mini-survey.

Thank you!

A Final Note from James

Now the structure's in place for your next report, I hope you'll be able to tackle the writing with much more confidence and energy!

Coming up in two weeks' time, we've got some tips for making a job transition go smoothly and effectively - so you can tie up all the loose ends before taking on that new promotion. And we also share best practice for developing a competency framework in your organization.

Best wishes for a truly excellent two weeks!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'James', with a stylized, flowing script.

James Manktelow

[email us](#)

Mind Tools

Essential Skills for an Excellent Career!

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