

- ◆ highlighting techniques
- ◆ margins and spacing.

Is every section, subsection, paragraph, sentence and word really necessary? Are they accurate? Do they convey the meaning you intended?

21. A Guide to Writing Reports

In general, the main points that can be taken into consideration when writing a report are as follows:

1. *Shortness*

During World War II, the Prime Minister sent a memo to his War Cabinet, stressing the importance of keeping reports short and to the point. He emphasized the need for clear, concise paragraphs that get straight to the main points. Avoid lengthy explanations and unnecessary phrases, and instead focus on delivering information efficiently.

2. *Report Style*

A successful report must be easy to read, understand, and accept. Readers should be able to grasp the facts, findings, conclusions, and recommendations without difficulty. Achieving this requires effective communication that meets the needs of your audience.

3. *Good Style*

Good style in report writing means conveying your message accurately and quickly. Avoid writing sentences that confuse readers or require multiple readings to understand. Your goal is to make it easy for readers to comprehend your report's content.

4. *Selectivity*

Carefully selecting the right words can enhance your message's clarity and meaning. Choose words that accurately convey your intended message and consider referring to

a vocabulary for alternatives to expand your vocabulary.

5. Accuracy

Ensure that all information presented in your report is truthfully accurate and demonstrable. Base your arguments on sound reasoning and avoid misleading or biased statements.

6. Objectivity

Reports should present information objectively, without personal opinions or emotions influencing the content. Consider all perspectives of a problem before concluding conclusions and recommendations.

7. Conciseness

Strive to keep your report concise by including only essential information. Focus on necessity rather than quantity, and aim for an average sentence length of fewer than 20 words to maintain reader engagement.

8. Clarity and Consistency

Revise your report after some time to gain a fresh perspective and ensure clarity and consistency in your writing. Keep your readers in mind and write with their understanding and comprehension in focus.

9. Simplicity

Simplify your writing by avoiding unnecessary complexity while ensuring all essential information is included. Consider your readers' capacity to comprehend technical information and provide clear explanations without oversimplifying.

10. Technical Writing

Technical writers should balance simplicity with accuracy when conveying complex information. Acknowledge readers' limitations and strive to make technical content accessible without losing accuracy or meaning.

11. Choosing Your Words Carefully

When children are learning English at school, they are encouraged to use longer and

longer words in progressively more complex sentences. In contrast, the report writer should be encouraged to do just the opposite. Generally, short words are preferred in short sentences.

12. Avoid pointless words

Some words and phrases – like basically, actually, undoubtedly, each and everyone and during our investigation – keep cropping up in reports. Yet they add nothing to the message and often can be removed without changing the meaning or the tone. Try leaving them out of your writing. You will find your sentences good, succeed and may even flourish without them.

22. LAYOUT AND DESIGN

Many considerations and decisions are required when choosing your overall layout and design. In particular, you will need to think about:

- ◆ format
- ◆ Page size and orientation
- ◆ Margins and spacing
- ◆ Headings and subheadings
- ◆ Numbering.

1. Format

Today's reports don't have to be dull and old-fashioned like they used to be. With the help of word processing and desktop publishing, we can now create reports that are visually attractive and charming to readers. There are different styles available, such as modern, ultra-modern, and enhanced modern, each offering unique and exciting formats.

A traditional report resembles something typed on a typewriter. A modern report goes a step further by adding lines, and boxes, changing fonts, and using italics to make it more visually appealing. An ultra-modern report takes it up a notch with a two- or three-column layout, which helps readers to read faster and understand more. In an enhanced modern report, we include images that are arranged and adjusted to make the report even more engaging. This format mimics the layout of newspapers, journals, and magazines, which people are accustomed to reading. Figure 3 shows examples of three designs that can inspire you to create your own unique page layouts.

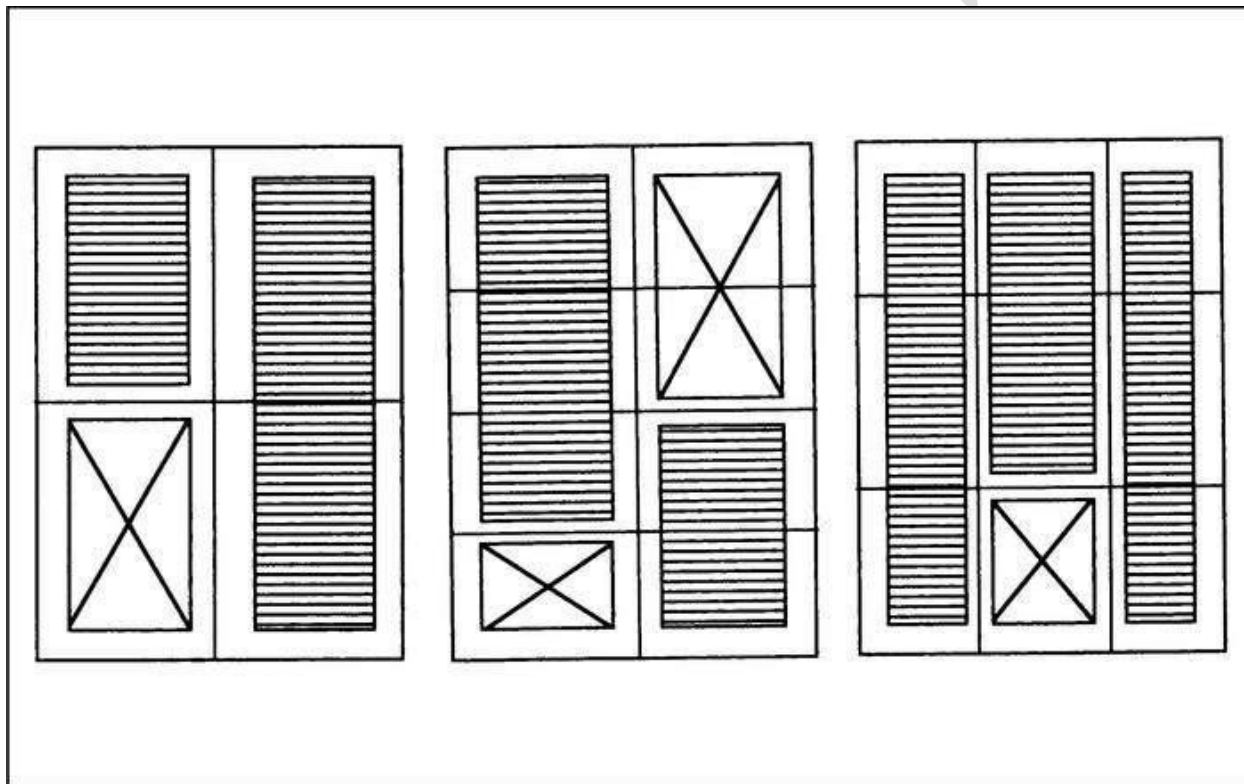


Fig. 3. Three-page designs.

2. Page size and orientation

What size of paper will you use? The standard pages are these:

| Paper size | mm | inches |
|------------|-----------|-------------|
| A1 | 594 x 841 | 23.4 x 33.1 |

| | | |
|----|-----------|-------------|
| A2 | 420 x 594 | 16.5 x 23.4 |
| A3 | 297 x 420 | 11.7 x 16.5 |
| A4 | 210 x 297 | 8.3 x 11.7 |
| A5 | 148 x 210 | 5.8 x 8.3 |

While the page orientation is presented in Figure 4.

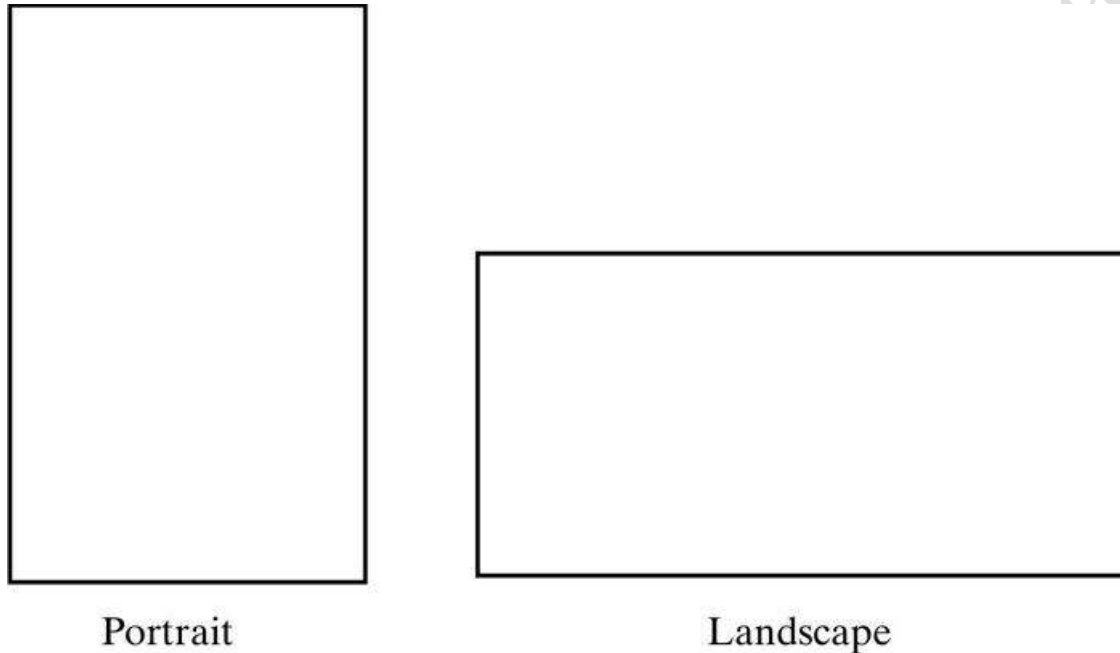


Fig. 4. Page orientation.

Writers tend to choose standard A4 paper as a matter of course. However, at least consider other options. If you are using a photocopier or laser printer, make sure the paper you choose will go through your machine.

In addition to the size of the paper, you will need to think about its orientation (see Figure 4). Will the report be portrait (vertical/tall) or landscape (horizontal/wide)? Most reports are portrait. Consider whether a landscape orientation for your report might work even more effectively.

3. Margins and spacing

It is far easier for a reader to assimilate information presented in small sections

than in huge, uninterrupted blocks of print. Pages with too much type and artwork give the appearance of being too heavy and hard to read. **White space** (or whatever color background is used) is very important not only to help the reader but also to give the report a professional look. It is important to allow:

- ◆ Adequate space between the lines of print (reports are often double-spaced with 1½- spacing for sub-paragraphs).
- ◆ An adequate and consistent margin on the left of the page for binding (the size of the margin on the left will vary according to the type of binding selected).
- ◆ Clear and consistent gaps between sections and paragraphs.
- ◆ A margin of at least an inch at the top (the header zone) and bottom (the footer zone) of the page.

Using short bulleted lists of related items (such as the one above) is another good way of breaking up paragraphs of text to make it easier to read. The list may be introduced by a colon, a dash, or both (:-), and the size of any indentations must be consistent.

4. Headings and subheadings

Headings and subheadings help busy readers of today by identifying and labelling blocks of type. They are not standard. You must invent them. Make sure that they:

- ◆ are comparatively short.
- ◆ are descriptive.
- ◆ would be expected, or at least would be easily interpreted.
- ◆ cover all the ground (collectively).
- ◆ do not overlap (although the same information may appear under more than one

heading if it supports more than one argument).

- ◆ are never vague (for example, avoid headings such as ‘General’, and ‘Other’)
- ◆ are in an order which readers will find logical (perhaps in alphabetical order, in chronological order, or order of importance)
- ◆ are identical to those listed in the table of contents (if used).

Once you have introduced a topic with a heading or subheading, you cannot leave that topic and move on to another one until you provide another heading or subheading. For this reason, subheadings should not repeat information provided in headings. For example, if your heading is ‘ABC Limited’, your subheadings could be ‘Production Department’, ‘Accounts Department’ and ‘Personnel Department’. There is no need to write, ‘ABC Limited – Production Department’.

Remember that the title of the report should be more prominent than section headings; section headings more prominent than paragraph headings; paragraph headings more prominent than sub-paragraph headings, and so on. Similarly, headings of the same rank should represent topics of roughly equal importance. In contrast, though, the less prominent the heading, the more specific must be the wording below it.

Think of it this way. You are driving from London to South Wales. As you approach the motorway you see a large sign giving fairly general directions: ‘Wales and the West’. As you cross the Severn Bridge you face a smaller sign providing more detailed information: ‘Newport’, ‘Cardiff’, ‘Swansea’. As you leave the motorway at Newport you observe an even smaller sign giving quite detailed information: ‘Retail Park’, ‘The Docks’, ‘Town Centre’. As you enter the industrial estate you see a very small sign giving details of every individual

store: 'B&Q', 'Comet', 'Tesco'.

The principle applies equally to reports: the more prominent the heading, the less specific the text; the less prominent the heading, the more specific the text.

It is better to structure the report with several short sections, each containing a few subheadings than to have just a few sections, each with several subheadings, subheadings or even sub-sub-subheadings.

5. Numbering

The role of numbering systems is simply to identify the various components of a report for reference and indexing purposes. There are two aspects to this:

- ◆ Numbering pages
- ◆ Numbering sections and paragraphs.

6. Pages

Any time you have more than one or two pages, you need to number them. Computer software has the capability of performing this function automatically, but you must determine where you want the page numbers. Several choices are acceptable – either the upper or lower outside corners or the middle of the bottom of the page. Placing the numbers on the outside corners allows readers to locate a specific page more easily when scanning through a report.

You can number the pages by following one of two methods. Either simply number the pages from 1 to n (n representing the final page number), beginning with the page after the title page. Or number the 'preliminaries' (the components before the main body) as (i), (ii), (iii), etc. – again beginning with the page after the title page, and number the remainder of the report from 1 to n.

7. Sections and paragraphs

When it comes to numbering sections and paragraphs, it is very important to keep the system simple. For many writers, the numbering seems to be an end in itself, and sometimes it appears that it determines the structure rather than vice versa. Here are some possible methods:

(i) *Combination of Roman and Arabic numbers*

Popular used in all European Commission reports, Roman numerals identify sections and Arabic numerals identify related text. The breakdown is extended by decimals if required. For example, the third section of a report could be numbered as follows:

III
 III.1
 III.1.
 1
 III.1.
 2
 III.1.
 3
 III.2
 III.2.
 1
 III.2.
 2

(ii) *Sections with unique sequential paragraph numbers*

Here Arabic numbers are used to identify sections, letters are used for subheadings and Roman numerals for sub-subheadings. For example:

5(a)i
 5(a)ii