Report writing hints for students

At the end of your research project, you want to report to your audience in such a way that they really get the message. This is true whether your audience is a client or an assessor. Both will want to get a clear picture of what you have achieved and how you got there. The following hints aim to support you in reporting your research project in such a way that your audience is sure to understand.

Purpose

- A written report is a means of *communication*, not the main objective of your project. Keep in mind at all times that your main objective is to do a *research project*, not to *write a report*. A written report is simply a way of bringing your project activities across to your audience.
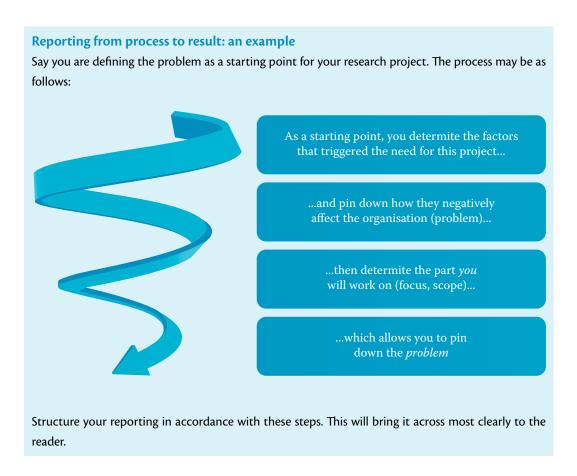
Structure

- As a rule of thumb, *reporting follows research*. Put differently, your research activities determine how your reporting will be structured, not the other way around. A few applications:
  - if your project involves three research activities, then report your main research in three corresponding chapters;
  - If you split a given research activity into four sub-activities, then divide that chapter into four corresponding sections. Such structural consistency makes for easy reading.

- There are basically two ways to report on an activity. The first is *from process* to *result*, as visualised here by the downward spiral. This works well when reporting on one of the following project steps:
  - the *problem definition*, which tends to start with an orientation and results in a specific problem question;
  - the design of a *research approach*, which involves a consideration of various information gaps and results in a set of research questions;
  - the *preliminary investigation*, which includes a review of theory, resulting in a selection of models and methods;
  - Any *research activity* that is part of your main research, which is typically a process of collecting and analysing data and results in an interim conclusion.
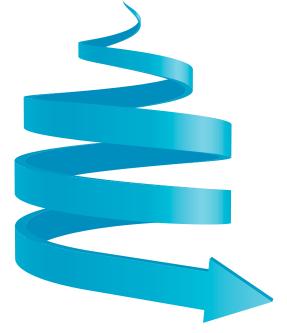
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Reporting from process to result: an example

Say you are defining the problem as a starting point for your research project. The process may be as follows:

As a starting point, you determine the factors that triggered the need for this project...

...and pin down how they negatively affect the organisation (problem)...

...then determine the part *you* will work on (focus, scope)...

...which allows you to pin down the *problem*

Structure your reporting in accordance with these steps. This will bring it across most clearly to the reader.

The second way to report on an activity is *from statement to specifics*, as visualised here by a downward spiral. This works well when reporting on one of the following project steps:

- the project aim: a statement of the core deliverable, followed by an increasingly detailed description of that deliverable. For instance, the core deliverable 'promotion plan' may be followed by a scope (e.g. 'suggested promotion channels') and further specifics (e.g. 'indication of costs per channel');
- the recommendation: from a proposed objective to increasingly concrete suggestions on how to reach this objective. For instance, the proposed objective to 'attract 2 new customers by end of year' may be followed by a concise strategy on how to accomplish this and by a more elaborate plan of what needs to be done and when.

Put shortly, the appropriate way of reporting depends on the *nature* of the activity.

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Language

- When it comes to language, use clear, specific verbs. For example, 'dealing with' is a rather vague verb to introduce a step in the project. Consider the following example: 'This step in the project deals with models and methods'. What is meant here? What exactly is the activity? What is its purpose? Vague language is a no-go for transparent reporting. Where possible, use a verb that clearly indicates the nature of the activity, such as 'specifying', 'preparing for' or 'concluding'.
- Use plain language. Avoid 'dressing up' your report with overly complex wording. Trained assessors pick up on this immediately. An example: 'The definitive nature of the model lends itself to giving direct and clear indications'. What is meant here? Why the fuzzy formulation? As a helpful hint, when in doubt just use the wording you would choose when informally *telling* someone about your project. Keep it real.
- Use correct language. Are you referring to the *customer* or *consumer*? *Efficiency* or *effectiveness*? *Marketing* or *promotion*? In a similar vein, fourth-year students sometimes refer to their work as a 'thesis'; they do so simply because it is the last piece of work in their studies and because it involves writing. However, a practically focused research project is not the same as a thesis. For instance, the former is an activity found in business, whereas the latter is not. So keep your language noise-free. Think critically about the terms you use.
- Use tables and diagrams. This applies in particular to the main research areas. In business, you want to keep it short and simple. Time is money. So if you want to compare and contrast numbers then use overviews such as tables, graphs, or diagrams. This creates transparency.

Good luck reporting on your project!