

Report Writing Tips



Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte
Health Service Executive

*'Don't write so you can be understood;
write so you cannot be misunderstood'*

Epictetus

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The audience

- Who am I writing this for? Who is my target audience?
- What do they want to know?
- What are their expectations of the investigation report?
- Who may potentially read the final report?
- What will this document be used for?
- Think about age, education or literacy, language or cultural issues, special needs, familiarity with the topic.
- What is the scope of the investigation?

Language

- The words you use play an important part in creating understanding.
- Use everyday words and avoid jargon.
- *'If you require any further assistance' – 'If you need more help'*
- When using abbreviations, define each one the first time you use it, for example, Emergency Department (ED). There is no need to use a full stop in abbreviations such as this, and they don't take an apostrophe when plural – e.g. EDs, GPs.
- Avoid Latin and French phrases and Latin abbreviations.
- If you must use specialised language, give definitions or examples.
- Be consistent with words used and use the same words for the same concept throughout, for example, heart attack v coronary event.
- Use words you really need.

Commonly Confused Words

<p>Advice / advise</p>	<p>Can you give me some advice? NOUN</p> <p>What would you advise? She advised him to give up smoking. VERB</p>
<p>Affect / effect</p>	<p>Will the strike affect your business? VERB</p> <p>What was the effect of the car crash? NOUN</p> <p>How will we effect the change? VERB</p>
<p>Been / being</p>	<p>Your claim has been paid. / They have been to Spain twice. (PAST EVENT/ACTION)</p> <p>Your claim is being reviewed at the moment. / Are you being serious? (PRESENT ACTION)</p>
<p>Continually / continuously</p>	<p>It rained continuously for eight hours – the children couldn't go out to play at all. ADVERB (WITHOUT STOPPING)</p> <p>He is continually late for work. ADVERB (FREQUENTLY)</p>
<p>Licence / license</p>	<p>Where is my driving licence? NOUN</p> <p>Are you licensed to sell alcohol? ADJECTIVE</p> <p>The council licenses market traders. VERB</p>
<p>Practice / practise</p>	<p>The GP is setting up a new practice. NOUN</p> <p>They need to practise violin before the exam. VERB</p>
<p>Their / there / they're</p>	<p>Their work on that feasibility study is excellent. (POSSESSIVE)</p> <p>They don't want to work there. (PLACE)</p> <p>They're hard workers. (THEY ARE)</p>

Writing in the third person

- ✿ Writing in the 3rd person means avoiding 'I, you, we'.
- ✿ It gives the report a neutral tone, appropriate to the process at hand.

'We met twice to consider the terms of reference.'

'This review team undertook to provide a fair and accurate report on the events that took place.'

Sentence and paragraph structure

Sentence structure

- Use one thought per sentence
- Keep your sentences short (between 15 to 20 words)
- If you see five commas – might be 2 sentences!

Paragraph structure

- Use one idea per paragraph
- When sections of the document are very long, use an introductory paragraph

Top Tip

HOW MANY WORDS IN A SENTENCE?

Max. 25 words

HOW MANY LINES IN A PARAGRAPH?

Max. 6 lines

Formatting

Layout

- Follow the Report Template
- Double check (at the end) that your table of contents matches your contents.
- Do not try to cram too much on a page. Use lots of white space as it helps make documents easier to read.
- Paragraphs should be numbered.

Font, structure and headings

✿ font

Be consistent. Decide on a style and use it throughout.

✿ structure

People take in simple information first and then more complex ideas – flow from simple to complex
Include a natural flow from one point to the next

✿ headings

Use heading and subheadings, they act as signposts

A larger font size, 14 pt, can help with clarity

Italics, underlining, bullets, bold and justification

● italics and underlining

Italics and underlining, or *both* at the same time, makes text difficult to read. Use these formatting tools sparingly or if possible, not at all.

● bullets

Use bullets to break up detailed or complex information. People are more likely to read five short points than what appears to be a long paragraph.

● bold

Bold print makes key information stand out. It should be used only for headings or to highlight text. Although very useful, only use bold print when really necessary.

● justification

Do not justify documents, always align documents to the left so that the type is in a straight line on the left only.

TO CAPITAL OR
not to capital,
that is the question

Letters

- Capital letters should be used for the first letter of a sentence, headings and for the names of people, places and institutions.
- Don't over-capitalise, it's bad grammar, and lower case letters are easier to read.

'The Clinical Review Team met at the Hospital to agree the Terms of Reference.'

'The clinical review team met at the hospital to agree the terms of reference.'

*One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine,
ten, 11, 12, 13, 14.....*

Numbering

- Write numbers between one and ten in words and from 11 upwards in figures.
- A number at the beginning of a sentence should be written out in full, e.g. 'Twenty people were in the hospital.'
- Write money or numbers in tables, in figure format, for example €24.00.
- Complete numbers should be on the same line and not split over two lines.
- Dates should always be written in full, e.g. 10th May 2011. Use the same format for numbers throughout a document.

Punctuation

“Quotations”

- If you have to quote a person’s words, or an extract from another source, use double quotation marks, and indent long quotes.
- When you are quoting something that has a spelling or grammar mistake, insert the term (*sic*) in italics and enclose it in brackets. Sic means, “*This is the way the original material was.*”
- Single quotes are used for quotes within quotes: for words that are defined (*‘Buch’* is German for book); for words that follow certain phrases like names or entitled, or to indicate a misnomer (the *‘free’* gift cost €40).

Apostrophe (’)

- An apostrophe shows possession (belonging to). It is not used to indicate plural (more than one).
The apostrophe comes before the **’s** in a singular word and after the **s’** in plural words.
For example: The dog belonged to Mary or James: Mary’s dog or James’ dog.
- Words made plural without an **s** are an exception.
For example: Man/men - *The man’s coat, the men’s coats*
- An apostrophe can be used when you leave out a letter, for example, don’t, isn’t – avoid these abbreviations in formal documents.
- It’s means IT IS

Commas (,)

- Read a sentence aloud and add a comma where you pause for a breath.
- Use to separate items in a list, except the penultimate one.
- If you have inserted a clause to provide extra information – but make sure the sentence still makes sense if the clause is removed.
- Use a comma after introductory words or phrases – ‘In addition, we... / However, it was not...’

Full stops(.)

- Use the full stop at the end of a sentence, that is one that contain a noun (a person, place, thing or creature) and a verb (doing word).
- Use a full stop to separate statements that are not linked.



Exclamation mark (!)

Exclamation marks are used for less formal writing.
Do not use them in writing reports.

Hyphens

- For two digit numbers written out – *twenty-two / fifty-one / ninety-nine*
- When you use numbers as adjectives – *a three-year-old PC / a 30-minute meeting*
- For compound adjectives placed before the noun (but not for proper nouns) – *an up-to-date record / a long-term issue / a tax-efficient solution*
- When there could be confusion of meaning – *to react vs. to re-act / to reform vs. to re-form*
- For compound nouns – *he went for a medical check-up*

Formatting punctuation

- Insert one clear space after a comma, e.g. ‘apples, oranges...’
- Insert two clear spaces after a full stop.
- Insert one clear line between paragraphs.
- Insert two clear spaces after using a colon ‘:’
- Do not put a dash after a colon ‘:-’
- Semicolons can be used for dividing clauses in a sentence, but using full stops or commas is clearer. I never vote for anyone; I always vote against.
- (If a whole sentence is inside the brackets, so is the full stop.)

Punctuating lists

Punctuate verbal lists consistently.

Lists beginning with an introductory statement

All employees are required to respond to the public:

- Quickly and without undue delay;
- Sensitively, having regard to age, capacity to understand and any disability they may have; and
- Fairly, by treating people in a like manner.

Points should begin in lower case and end in a semi colon:

Complete sentences

Policy on smoking in the workplace

- As an employee you have the right to work in a smoke free atmosphere.
- Every visitor has a right to a smoke free atmosphere.

If the list does not depend on an introductory statement to be understood, points should begin with a capital letter and end in a full stop.

No punctuation required

You are entitled to a days leave if you work these days:

- St Patrick's Day
- Easter Monday
- Christmas Day

There will be times when no punctuation is required.

Draft and version control

All draft documents must be marked with a **DRAFT** watermark.

One person must be designated to OWN the drafting and version control process.

Each new version should be marked and saved with the date and version number.

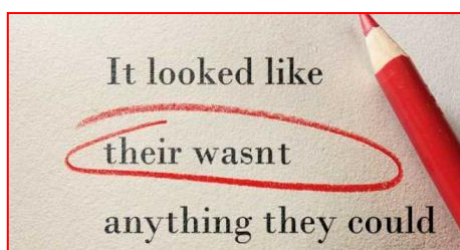
Be careful with comments – tracked changes – editing comments – delete before final – Final SHOWING MARKUP!!

Tables or figures / diagrams

- Double check any figures used to make sure they add up. It is good practice to seek another person to check figures with you.
- Each table should have a reference number and should be captioned.
- If your report contains a lot of tables or diagrams, it will help your readers if you include a list of them.
- This list should include a page number to find them on and a reference number for each.

Proof reading

- If you print a hardcopy, use a coloured pen to double check your work
- If you edit on a computer, track changes
- Read the document from end to the start
- Read your writing aloud – to highlight repetitive word use, uneven flow and confusing sentence structure
- Leave it for a few days to make it less familiar
- Avoid interruptions
- Do it at least twice and date it so you know the current version
- Mark every page that has an error



Do not rely on the spell checker alone – you may have the right spelling for the wrong word, e.g. though for thought, there instead of their, from for form.

Successful reports

Ask yourself?

- Is the content clear and easy to understand?
- Is the content in a logical order?
- Is the content factually correct?
- Have experts approved content where necessary?
- Have adverse findings been commented on and feedback included in report?
- Do dates and days agree, e.g. was the 20th a Monday?
- Do headings on the contents page correspond with those in the document?
- Are there grammar, spelling or punctuation mistakes?
- Are there word processing errors – e.g. 0 instead of O, * instead of 8?
- Do paired items match, e.g. (brackets), ‘quotation marks’, “quotation marks”?

Accuracy

- Always check and confirm

Brevity

- Get to the point as quickly as possible. Don't use extra words.

Clarity

- Make sure your audience can understand what you write.

Some useful links:

www.plainenglish.co.uk

www.nala.ie