

4.8.3: Front Sections of a Report

Learning Objectives

- Describe various sections that may be used in the front of a report

In formal reports, you may encounter introductory sections before the actual report itself. These “front sections” are important for establishing context and structure of the report for the reader. In some reports, such as sales situations or proposals, the entire report becomes part of a contract. These front sections aid in that function.

Front sections may include the following:

- Transmittal letter
- Cover page and Title Page
- Table of Contents
- Executive Summary

You will (or not) use these sections based on the context of your report, the information your audience needs, and your company’s policies.

Transmittal Letter

A transmittal letter is sent to the company or business leader who requested the report. This letter may be sent separately from the report. This letter can be printed (especially in situations where the report itself is a paper copy), or it can be sent as an email.

This letter describes the need for the report and the date of report completion. The letter includes the background of the project, a reference to the **problem analysis**, and outlines the procedure used to determine the recommendations presented. It is most frequently used with reports created by one company and submitted to another, such as those associated with a sales situation. This letter can be used in both informational and analytical reports.

This letter should be formatted as a standard business letter (as discussed in Module 2: Writing in Business). It is frequently signed by an officer of the sending company to emphasize the formality of the document and potentially establish legal formality. Pay careful attention to company policy and legal advice. It’s also important to note that some companies prefer this same information in another format within the report.

Here is a sample transmittal letter, than can be adjusted to the situation.

June 25, 2015

Dr. David McMurrey, Chairman
Energy Experts of Austin
2000 W 29th Street
Austin, TX 78705

Dear Dr. McMurrey:

Attached is the report you requested, entitled *Energy-Efficient Guide: Employing Energy-Efficient Building Strategies in a Residential Home*.

This report is an analysis of a recent study conducted in Ann Arbor, Michigan, on the effectiveness of employing energy-efficient building strategies to minimize energy consumption and costs in a residential home. Using software technologies, the home was modeled to create two scenarios: an energy-efficient home and a standard home. This report details how the study found the energy-efficient home to be both cost efficient and effective at decreasing energy consumption. Such advances might prove to be the catalyst that the housing market needs to spur builders into a new era of home construction.

Thorson James, our solar engineer, carefully double-checked all the technical details in the report. Cherie Sorenson, our technical editor, was of great help in putting the final report together.

I hope this report meets your needs, generated future studies, and educates the public about the environmentally friendly options available in home building today. If you have any further questions, please feel free to contact me at RLMiller@EBA.com.

Sincerely yours,

Gwen L Miller, Vice-President
Environmental Building Associates, Inc.

Encl. Energy-Efficient Guide: Employing Energy-Efficient Building Strategies in a Residential Home

Cover Page and or Title Page

Almost all formal reports have a Cover or Title Page, perhaps both. These two pages are used in nearly identical ways, yet some report types or organizations require both with a slight modification to the page's purpose.

A cover page is a very simple, precise, brief way to introduce your report to the reader. This should contain:

- A specific title in large font
- Company name
- Name of the author(s)
- Date of the report
- Relevant picture

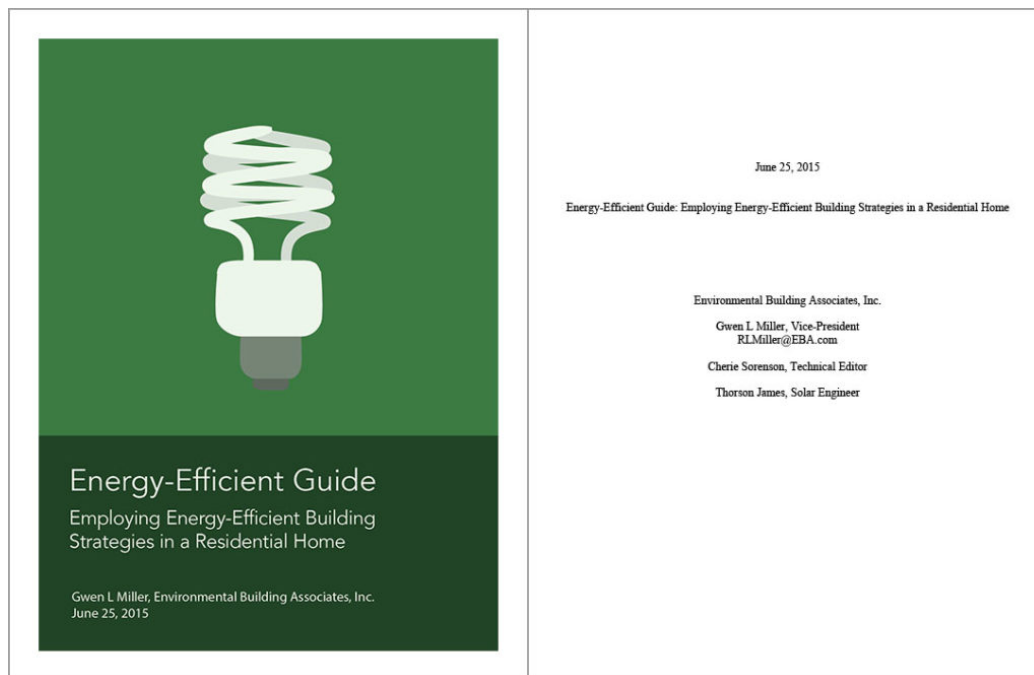
The use of a relevant picture or two can help reinforce the subject of the report. One goal of the cover page is to be informative and scalable because once it is filed, it will need to be easy to pick out of a stack of other reports. A second goal is to make the report stand out. If the report cover looks bleak and dull, the reader will start reading with a negative outlook. Think of the cover page of a report like the outfit you would wear to an interview. The cover page is the first thing that is seen: it will be the foundation for first impressions, for better or worse.

One easy way to make the report stand out is to use a theme for the report that your audience can connect to. For example, if a report is written to McDonald's, the cover page will use yellows and reds, perhaps with the golden arches as a picture. With a carefully chosen color scheme and images, you can help the reader believe that he or she is the most important aspect of the report. As always, when you include graphics of any kind in a document you are sending out, be sure they don't dramatically increase the file size, which can make the document hard to download, and that they transmit easily among devices and platforms.

The title page is an opportunity to provide more specific, detailed information about the document and its authors to its intended audience. It will be very similar to your front cover **and it repeats the information on the cover, but adds more important details**. This may include a report number, date, title, the names and addresses of authors, specific contract information, the name and address of the supervisor, and the name and address of the organization that supported the report.

Title pages may be formally laid out according to MLA or APA formatting. However, most business and non-research institutions are relatively relaxed on the format. If you are creating a sales document that may become part of a contract, your company (or your potential customer) will list their particular requirements for the title page. With the power of word processing software, companies have started to use images on these pages as well as on covers. The best advice is usually to keep it simple and professional. These pages may be used with either informational or analytical reports.

Take a look at these examples:



Cover Page

Title Page

Figure 1. Sample Cover and Title Pages for *Energy-Efficient Guide: Employing Energy-Efficient Building Strategies in a Residential Home*

Table of Contents, Tables of Exhibits, Tables of Illustrations

Formal reports are frequently lengthy and contain a Table of Contents to assist readers. There may also be tables of exhibits or illustrations if needed. The use of these sections in larger reports allows readers to quickly access the area of their interest: these sections list important headings or figures in the report alongside their corresponding pages. These sections may be used with either Informational or Analytical reports.

Table of Contents

Typically this is one of the last sections of the document to be created, since it relies on the body of the report to be generated. This may be used in either informational or analytical reports.

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2.2 Standard Home (SH)	2
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2.3 Energy Efficient Home	3
2.3.1 Modeling	3
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2.4.1 Heating and cooling systems	5
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Figure 2. Example table of contents. Click to access a PDF of this example.

You're familiar with tables of contents (TOC) but may never have stopped to look at their design. The TOC shows readers what topics are covered in the report, how those topics are discussed (the subtopics), and on which page numbers those sections and subsections start.

In creating a TOC, you have a number of design decisions:

- **Levels of headings to include.** In longer reports, consider only including the top two levels of headings. This keeps the TOC from becoming long and unwieldy. The TOC should provide an at-a-glance way of finding information in the report quickly.
- **Indentation, spacing, and capitalization.** Notice in Figure 2 that items in each of the three levels of headings are aligned with each other and page numbers are right-aligned with each other. Notice also the capitalization: Main chapters or sections are all caps; first-level headings use initial caps on each main word; lower-level sections use initial caps on the first word only.
- **Vertical spacing.** Notice that the first-level sections have extra space above and below, which increases readability.

One final note: Make sure the words in the TOC are the same as they are in the text. As you write and revise, you might change some of the headings—don't forget to change the TOC accordingly.

If you have used specially formatted headings when creating the body of the document, then these tables can be quickly generated by the word processing software. For example, if you use Microsoft Word's styles for headings, the reference toolbar will offer a choice of formats and generate the TOC automatically.

Tables of Exhibits or Illustrations

There may be a few different situations in which you should use additional tables of exhibits or illustrations; for example, these tables may be useful to include if your figures or tables are referred to repeatedly throughout your text. Additionally, as a rule of thumb, you should include a table of exhibits when your report is approximately 15 pages or more. This also allows your readers to flip between exhibits more easily in order to compare them.

Executive Summary

An executive summary is just as the name says: it summarizes all the materials that follow in the report. This section is different from an introduction as it summarizes the entire report, rather than simply introducing it or laying out the structure for the reader. A good way to approach the executive summary is to write it as if the executive or decision maker will *only* read this section, even though that's unlikely to be the case. This section is found in longer reports and is less likely to be found in a shorter report. It can also be used in both informational and analytical reports.

Executive summaries should be written **after** the entire report is completed. This allows the summary to be both comprehensive and well structured. Remember, the investigation and details of the report must be complete and validated before the summary can be written.

This section is offered in paragraph format, with a paragraph summarizing each section in the report; thus, the executive summary is presented in the same order as the report. The executive summary rarely includes images or graphics; however, a table might be offered at the end of this section if the recommendation or options can be easily summarized into a table. In sales or recommendation situations, the executive summary takes on greater importance. It must clearly demonstrate that the analyses in the report are comprehensive and thorough, and it must clearly lead the reader to the author's desired conclusion.

Most importantly, all this must be done with brevity. Most executive summaries are at most two to three pages, but length varies in proportion to the complexity and length of the report.

? What About Abstracts?

An abstract is very similar to an executive summary, although it is far more likely to be found in an informational report than an analytical report. An abstract may help readers determine if the remainder of the document is relevant to their needs. Abstracts tend to be one page or less. Additionally, abstracts are typically used in more scholarly writing, such as business research projects. [Samples and advice on abstracts may be found at Purdue OWL.](#)

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