

4.8.4: Body Sections of a Report

Learning Objectives

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

The body of a report is what comes to mind when most people think of a report; it's the primary content. In this page, we will discuss several sections that are frequently used in formal reports:

- Introduction
- Background
- Purpose (or problem statement)
- Research (or methods)
- Recommendation (or solution)
- Overview of alternative options
- Evaluation
- Benefits
- Qualification
- Management
- Implementations
- Schedule
- Methods of operation
- Costs
- Conclusion

This list may look intimidating, so it's important to keep in mind that this isn't a Table of Contents for *every* formal report. Remember, as the writer, you should use what best suits the material's and organization's requirements. There may be additional sections needed in unique cases.

Introduction

An **introduction** sets up the structure of a report. Essentially, the introduction tells the reader what is to come and in what order, and it reminds the reader of the key criteria that instigated the report's creation. This section is key to the reader following and retaining key points of the report.

Introductions are used in both informational and analytical reports. In an informational report, this helps segment the data that follows. In an analytical report, the introduction helps the reader come to the conclusion the author expects. An introduction is used in all informal reports as well. In an informal report, there may or may not be a separate header with this label, but an introduction must always be present.

Depending upon readers' expected reception of the content, the introduction may foreshadow the conclusion. With receptive audiences, the outcome is clear in the introduction. With less receptive audiences, it is important to present all the facts and research prior to declaring a conclusion; thus, for less receptive audiences, it may be better to foreshadow the conclusion than to fully declare it. This allows the reader to end up at the same conclusion as the author as details develop.

The introduction may also include the problem statement or purpose of the report. However, in longer reports, these may end up either in the background or as their own sections.

Background

The **background** section of a report explains the circumstances that led to the report's creation. In some situations, this section may be labeled as **criteria** or **constraints**, or the topic may be briefly addressed in the **transmittal letter** or introduction. This section can appear in both informational and analytical reports.

The background provides a baseline of the current situation and any potential constrictions such as budget, time, human resources, etc. This section explains why the investigation or work was completed. It may introduce how the information is thorough, even if 100 percent certainty is not possible.

Purpose or Problem Statement

As mentioned, the **purpose** or **problem statement** section may be part of the background, or it can stand separately, depending upon the complexity of the report. The purpose or problem statement should be worded like this example:

The purpose of this report is to address [the problem or question that the requester needs addressed]. This report will accomplish this by investigating [whatever you researched or developed for the report]k.

While the example shows the proper phrasing for an analytical report, it could be reworded to fit an informational report: for example, “details from three solutions are listed.”

Research or Methods

The **research** section (also sometimes called **methods**) is where authors establish their credibility as they show how their perspective is supported by outside experts. This section provides background on where data used in the report was found: *it is not a section where data is listed*.

By telling your audience how you came to know what you have found out, you are demonstrating to them that your results are trustworthy and that they truly hold significance. With strong methods for finding out your facts, your readers will feel comfortable and confident in making the changes your report recommends. Your data will appear later in the **evaluation**, so that the data is in the same place as the reader is learning about its meaning. Additionally, the data can be presented in full in the **appendix**.

Completing and sharing research comes with a set of legal issues. Pay special attention Module 4: Research and follow the guidelines and rules you learn there. You’ll always need to provide credit, or citation, for the information you gather from others. Lack of appropriate citation or attribution can cause legal and credibility problems.

Recommendation or Solution

This section may stand on its own, or it may have several subsections depending upon the complexity of the report. Additionally, depending upon the receptivity of the audience to your solution, this section may come earlier or later in the report. In some reports the **recommendation** is used in lieu of the **conclusion**. This section is found only in analytical reports.

In this section, you will report your recommendations, beginning with your first choice. Explain why you prioritized each choice by elaborating on different facets the solution’s feasibility: economical, structural, and operational. Emphasize the solution’s benefits. Remember you can suggest that you do not recommend a particular alternative solution. However, you need to explain why you do not recommend the solution, according to the economical, structural, and operational feasibility.

Overview of Alternative Options

In this section, you must underline the key features of each possible option. Make sure they are easy to understand and presented in a friendly layout. Keep in mind that the goal is to allow your audience to make the best decision. This section is typically used in informational reports, where no recommendation is made.

Evaluation

This should be the bulk of your report; you must evaluate the options using the criteria you created. Add graphs, charts, etc. to show that you have studied your options, and have come up with statistics that back up your reasons why your alternative beats the competition. If your audience is likely to be resistant to your recommendation, the evaluation should appear before you make the recommendation. This section is found only in analytical reports.

This section should state the end results of your research and detail how you got there: how you evaluated the alternatives and, from there, you would decide which alternative best fit your organization.

Benefits

This section explains the benefits of the solution. There is little reason why your proposal should be accepted if there are not meaningful benefits. Thus, be sure to show that your solution will result in substantial benefits for the organization, company, etc. Some may think to omit this section when the report was requested; however, it is always helpful to have comprehensive listing of why something is being proposed and to document all the items the solution addresses.

This section is found in analytical reports, especially in proposals. In informational reports, this section may provide a detailed “how-to” not associated with some type of comparison.

Qualifications

This section may stand alone or be part of the benefits section. A **qualifications** section is a good place to explain the talent and experience of yourself and your team members. Depending on your readers, this section may be small or large. As with all business documents, you need to be honest when you write your qualifications.

Management

This section may stand alone or be part of the benefits section. In some cases, the resumes of the proposed team for the project are requested or provided. In those situations, this section is found as part of the **back matter**. A project's success depends on its management team, and readers are impressed if you can describe your project management structure in your proposal. By identifying each person on your team and explaining what their tasks and responsibilities are, you can coordinate your work efficiently. It is very helpful for each person to know what they will be doing beforehand so there won't be many problems concerning leadership and time management further into the project.

Implementation

This section details when, why, and how the solution will be used for the first time. The **implementation** period is usually a trial period to see if the solution is feasible as planned. Thus, you will pick a time that does not impact the normal operation of existing programs, patterns of operation, etc. In addition, you will describe the location of implementation, who will be involved, costs of implementation, what is expected to happen, the date and time of implementation, the duration of implementation, etc. You should also explain why you chose this time for implementing the solution. State that during this time you will note what works and what needs to be changed.

This section is found in analytical reports, especially in proposals. In informational reports, this may provide a detailed "how-to" not associated with some type of comparison.

Schedule

A **schedule** section may be found separately if the product or project is complex. In other instances, it is combined with the **implementation** section. In some situations, the schedule is part of the back matter and exists more as a list or table of dates and accomplishments.

Schedules help provide readers with three things:

1. Schedules give readers a deadline, so they know when to expect a final result.
2. Schedules can be critiqued by readers to make sure they are feasible.
3. Schedules are a good way to keep track of how a project is proceeding.

In addition to project deadlines, schedules should also include due dates for drafts, resources, and other information that is needed to assist you with your project goal.

Methods of Operation

This section describes how the solution will fit into and be used as a functional part of the day-to-day operation of the company, business, etc. Detail the date you expect to launch the solution into the operation of the company, the place from where the solution will operate, how it will operate, and who will be involved (identify their responsibilities, duties, and any titles, certifications, degrees, etc.).

This section is found in analytical reports, especially in proposals. In informational reports, this may provide a detailed "how-to" not associated with some type of comparison.

Costs

This section tells how much the solution will **cost** in dollar amounts. This section is generally presented after all the explanation of implementation, benefits, etc. That way the reader is fully appreciative of what the costs cover. It is expected that numbers presented are accurate to the penny, unless otherwise specified by whatever margin of error is appropriate to the situation. In informal reports and some formal reports, this section is part of the body (or evaluation) detail. For some formal reports, there is extensive line by line detail of parts, services, and/or supplies. When this is the case, the costs section may be part of the appendices and will only be referenced from the body.

Numbers in costs are generally presented using tables, tabs, or spreadsheet inserts to align decimal points direct above one and other. Text aligns left and numbers align right as in the following table. If all numbers end with zero cents as in \$24.00, omit the decimal and following zeros. Ensure any column of information has a heading. Most software offers attractive templates to set apart information and data. The best advice is to use the simplest formatting. These table should work to aid the reader in understanding and retention, rather distracting the reader with colors and shapes.

Description	Cost
Display Counters (2)	\$75.50
Orange Signs (2)	\$24.18

This section is found in analytical reports, especially in proposals. In informational reports, this will be used when the purpose of the reports was to research costs of some item.

Conclusion

The **conclusion**, as the header says, finishes the body of the report: it provides a summary of the major ideas of the report. While not as long as an **executive summary**, it may have a similar feel in order to provide a comprehensive reminder of the key components of either an analytical or informational report. The closing of a report should never introduce a fact or idea not presented earlier in the report.

In sales or persuasive reports, include in your conclusion how you're going to go implement your ideas for the company and how it will enrich the company; explain why the company should choose your course of action. Compare statistics and data and help the readers understand the logical choice and the course of action that would aid in selecting one option over the other. Refer back to your expertise on the subject matter and help them realize that your idea is the choice they are looking for. Based on your experiences, they will most likely take your side if you present the argument efficiently.

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