Report Writing: Generic

There are many kinds of 'reports': empirical (or scientific) reports, case study reports, lab reports, engineering reports, business (or corporate) reports. Each has specific requirements. There are common elements too, which is why they are all called 'reports'. This helpsheet outlines a *generic report format* which is suitable for a range of contexts, e.g., when your lecturer asks you to "write a report" and they are not specific about the kind of report required.

Structure

In terms of structure, a generic report is similar to an essay with a few key differences:

- **Introduction** (5-10 percent of content): background to issue, statement of aim, outline of report
- **Body** (80-90 percent of content): divided into Findings and Discussion
- **Conclusion** (5-10 percent of content): summary of report and deductions from Discussion

However, a generic report also includes an **Abstract** (100-200 words) that is separate from, and occurs prior to, the **Introduction** (and on a separate page); a **Table of Contents**; a **Recommendations** section; and an optional **Appendices** section at the end of the report (placed *after* your References).

The body of a generic report is typically divided into the following sections:

- **Findings:** a summary of information discovered during your investigations or research.
- **Discussion** (or 'Analysis'): a careful evaluation of the data presented in the Findings. The method of evaluation varies across disciplines, so check your assessment instructions and requirements for discipline-specific expectations.
- **Recommendations:** a list of what you think should be done to correct a problem or overcome the issue outlined in the Introduction.

Sometimes a **Literature Review** is incorporated before the Findings section. You can think of the main parts of the report like this:

- Findings: what you found
- Discussion: what you think about what you found
- Recommendations: what you want done based on what you found

Report language

Reports always adopt formal expression. First person pronouns and phrases ("I think …", "In my view …") are rarely used. Instead:

- **Avoid -** I argue that there has been a rise in shareholder value … (first person)
- **Preferred -** It is argued that there has been a rise in shareholder value … (third person)

The use of the active voice is also often minimised in report writing. In the active voice, the subject performs the action expressed by the verb. In the passive voice, the subject receives the action. For example:

- **Active:** A quarter of all applicants failed the law admission exam
- **Passive:** The law admission exam was failed by a quarter of all applicants

While important, the use of these formal writing conventions can make for stilted, abstract-sounding, and monotonous writing. It is important to make your position clear in a report, especially in the Discussion section. Therefore, whilst it is generally important to avoid first person, active sentences in most parts of a report, sometimes these are unavoidable.

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Report Style

The style of report writing is clear and business-like. Imagine being a company consultant pitching your report to meet a corporate client.

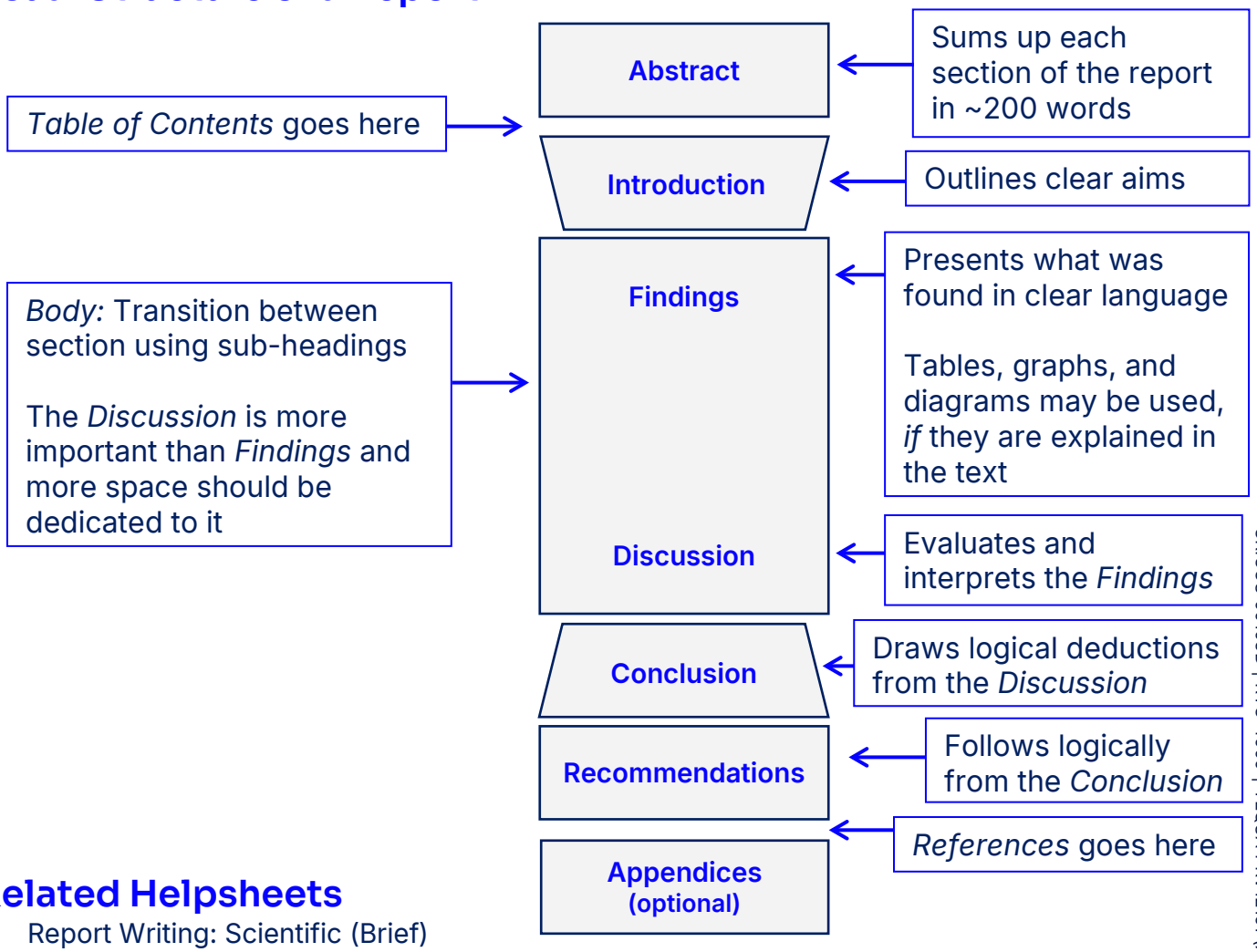
Avoid

- Idiom and slang
- Contractions (don't, won't, can't)
- Abbreviations (e.g., etc.) and unexplained acronyms
- Strong expressions of opinion (be cautious in what you claim and back up your claims with evidence and/or argument)
- Excessive description (make your point, back it up and move on)

Permitted in report writing are

- Diagrams, charts and tables of all kinds
- Suitably introduced bullet pointed lists (ensure they are not just lists without contextual explanation)
- Cross references to other sections (e.g., Appendices)
- Non-scholarly literature may be used *if* references to peer-reviewed, scholarly literature are also included

Visual Structure of a Report



Related Helpsheets

- Report Writing: Scientific (Brief)
- Report Writing: Tenses in Science
- Paragraph Structure

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