Writing Your Research Report

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Introduction

Getting the layout and writing style of an essay or report correct may seem unnecessary, however it is an important part of post-graduate work. This is because you need your reader to focus on what you are saying, not how you are saying it. The more you work on your writing the easier it will be for you to write fluently and convert your ideas clearly and succinctly.

This is not an exhaustive guide, nor should it replace guidelines supplied by your institute. It is, however, a brief selection of tips and suggestions for you to consider.

The biggest issue with much student writing is that is makes little sense to the reader. If the sentence structure, grammar and punctuation are incorrect, the text will not easily make sense. It is therefore essential that you edit, edit and edit again. Read your work aloud and ask other people to read it to check it makes sense.

As McNiff and Whitehead (2010) say:

'Good papers take about ten drafts, often more, to final completion. The discipline of the refining and editing process forces you to synthesise to give sense to the whole. It also ensures that you write for an audience, not only for yourself.'

This may seem like a long document but I believe it is essential reading. The better your writing, the more likely your ideas will shine through.

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Academic Writing

Document Layout

The rules for academic conventions may change from institute to institute. This guide suggests how to approach Post-Graduate writing in a clear way, but please do alway check with your supervisor and your institute for the conventions you need to follow. There is a template report document on the VLE for you to use if you wish, but remember it is just a guide. Here are some guides that do make sense however and make it easier for your examiner to read and evaluate your work without being distracted by layout issues:

- Use 11 or 12-point type in a clear font such as Arial, Calibri or Tahoma.
- The space between your lines is best at 1.5 or double spacing.
- Ensure margins are approximately 2cm.
- A Table of Contents is strongly recommended. If you create one in the early stages, it also becomes your essay plan and therefore is an outline for both writer and reader. Also use clear headings and sub-headings to make it easy to navigate through long essays. You do not have to submit your report with a Table of Contents.
- Referencing - As well as obviously referencing a text directly that relates to a subject you are discussing, you also need to reference in other ways. If you are writing something which has a theoretical background, then it is good academic practice to to reference it. For example, this has been referenced: 'This learning was clearly on a deep rather than surface level (Marton and Saljö, 1976), evidenced by…'
  Ensure you use reliable sources - just using the core texts and some websites and TED talks does not make for a deep enough body of work to back up your research. You need to find books and reputable journal article. Where possible go to the source - do not quote a textbook of general educational theories talking about Vygotsky without reading Vygotsky's work as well.
  You must follow your institute's guidelines for referencing protocol.
- Be consistent - for example, if you use italics for quotations, make sure you do it throughout.

Academic Writing Style

> *'Style to be good must be clear. Clearness is secured by using words that are current and ordinary.'* Aristotle (Guardian and Observer style guide, n.d.)

Developing an academic voice can be a tricky process. It is not just about using the disciplinary terminology and using long words, as this can just confuse your reader. It is about considering the claims you make in a scholarly way - not too personal and not too packed with jargon. Clichés, such as 'in this day and age' or 'leave no stone unturned' are phrases that have been overused, and in academic writing are considered as padding and should be avoided (I want to add 'at all costs' but that would be a cliché). Make sure everything earns its keep or it is just filling up space. The cleaner the writing, the easier it is for the reader to understand you.

How you communicate your research through the written report is a key part of good research practice. Your writing is the assessor's way to see your thought process. The more clearly you write the easier it is to convince them that you understand what you are writing about. A badly written report makes it hard to see your thinking and your ideas, it makes it unclear where the learning outcomes are being addressed and it can show a lack of care.

Writing is a skill like any other and requires practice. The earlier you start writing the more time you will have to refine it. Research is 50 percent writing and revising, 40 percent research and 10 percent planning.

Punctuation and Grammar

Ensuring you use clear, correct language is another way of showing you have taken care with your research. A badly written piece suggests it may not have received the attention required. This list, whilst not exhaustive, contains many of the common mistakes students make:

- Check your spelling - use a spell checker. Also look out for errors such as writing you instead of your.

- Check your grammar - a free online tool such as Grammarly or prowritingaid.com is invaluable if you are unsure. They are not always completely correct so do not rely on them as your only proof-reading tool.

- Do not contract words - use full words, for example, use 'do not' rather than 'don't'.

- Wrong words - it is essential that you understand the words you use. For example what is the difference between findings and results, conclusion and recommendations. Use a dictionary, both to check spelling and check meanings. A lot of writing time is not spent on writing about your subject, it is spent checking the quality of your writing.

- Use of capital letters - The words we capitalise are proper nouns (names) and proper adjectives (e.g. a Shakespearean play or a Thai curry). We also capitalise the first word of a sentence and the important words in titles. If in doubt check.

- Missing words - Often when writing we miss out a word. You are more likely to notice missing words if you read your work aloud when checking.

- Check you understand how to use punctuation correctly.

- Apostrophes - These are used to show ownership; e.g. 'This is Sam's car.' If the car belonged to more than one person the apostrophe goes after the s; e.g. 'This is the students' car.' This rule does not apply to its, his, hers or theirs). Apostrophes are also used to contract words; e.g. 'do not' becomes 'don't'. Contracted words are not common usage in academic writing. Apostrophes are not used to form plurals; e.g. 'I have many car's' is incorrect and should be 'I have many cars.'

- Commas - It will greatly help the flow of your text if you learn how to use commas correctly. These are used to give a slight pause in a sentence, to help with its meaning. They help to make more sense when reading, give clarity and break up lists.

- Complete sentences - Check you have placed full stops correctly. A sentence is a set of words that is complete in itself. For example, these two sentences are not complete. They should be one sentence with a comma in between: 'When variables actively hinder learning such as content or structure. Self-regulation among students becomes increasingly more difficult.' This should be written: 'When variables actively hinder learning such as content or structure, self-regulation among students becomes increasingly more difficult.'

- Check for double spaces - they make the text look uneven.

- Top tip - use the find function in your software to check for double spaces and contractions. You can also use this to check for incomplete work. I mark a section I still need to work on with a symbol such as §. Then I can search for all places with § and complete the work. You could also use the comments function to do the same. However, I retain the comments to track changes and queries sections with my supervisor.

- Allow enough time to revise and rewrite - ask a friend to read your work.

Driving Your Argument

Keep your focus on the end result - ask yourself if what you have written is driving your argument? Is it helping you to make the points which support the claim you are making. Having the title and your research questions written above your working space can help to remind you.

Do not make the reader do the work. If you refer to something then reference it properly - guide the reader to tables, appendices or other sections with a simple bracketed instruction '(see Table 3)'. If you are explaining something which has many components, consider using a table or bullet points. Do not fall into a habit of writing in note form however, you must explain your work using full prose - tables or lists are supplementary to help clarify, not to replace.

Consider the meaning of what you are writing. Does the evidence 'prove' something? Do you truly 'believe' what you are stating or is it one suggested answer of which there may be many? For example, rather than using 'I believe' it may be better to use 'the evidence suggests'. This has a more objective tone. Qualitative research is not definitive or categorial so the voice you use needs to be more cautious. For example, 'the data suggest…' is preferable to 'the data show…' or 'this suggests that…' rather than 'this proves that…' (unless of course it does prove something). The table below (Table 1.1) suggests some verbs you may find useful:

Table 1.1 Examples of words which link to strength of assertion

Strong assertion (may or may not be evidence-based)	Assertion with no evidence	Tentative Assertion	Assertion based on evidence
argues	believes	hypothesises	demonstrates
declares	claims	proposes	establishes
insists	thinks	speculates	finds
maintains		suggests	shows
states			

To help you chose appropriate academic language, Musostudy also has a list of critical sentence starters (http://www.musostudy.com/resources/3SS/sentence-starters.pdf) and a list of linking words (http://www.musostudy.com/resources/3SS/linking-words.pdf) which you may find helpful. The University of Manchester's Academic Phrasebank is also a useful and comprehensive aid (http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk).

The Guardian and Observer style guide is also a useful tool for when you want to check writing conventions - such as whether to capitalise or hyphenate wifi or not: https://www.theguardian.com/guardian-observer-style-guide-a

For more guidance on academic writing please talk to your supervisor about accessing help. These books can also help you with understanding and structuring writing:

- Godfrey, J. (2013) The Student Phrase Book. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Rose, J. (2001) The Mature Student's Guide to Writing. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave.

Criticality

It is important to have a level of critical argument in your work. It easy to fall into the trap of only writing descriptively. Description is useful, and important, for setting up your discussions. We use descriptive writing to give an account of procedures and methods and to provide an overview. However, it only reports ideas, it does not transform them. Critical writing is analytical, evaluative and reflective. It helps you to develop an argument, makes judgements about information, and transform it to move ideas forward. Ask why and so what of each statement you are making - this will help you think around the subject and delve deeper into critical thinking. You can read more about critical writing here: http://www.musostudy.com/resources/3SS/read-backwards-handout.pdf.

Using Citations

It is better to use your own words. Making your work reliant on lots of quotes and paraphrasing leads to a bypassing of your own thoughts on the subject. We are looking to read about your unique interpretation of what you have read. We want to know about how you have evaluated it and how you are using it to drive your own research.

When introducing a reference, consider its function in your argument. It may be to support the information you are presenting (information prominent), to show previous research (weak author prominent) or to discuss a particular piece of work (author prominent). This will inform how you could structure your writing. Here are some examples:

Information prominent - In most concerts in the classical genre, transitions between pieces are silent (Smith, 2008).

Weak author prominent - Studies have shown that hip hop can produce feelings of comparable happiness to that of easy listening (Smith, 2008).

Author prominent - Smith (2008) conducted an in-depth study on the potential for happiness and reached the conclusion that there were many benefits derived from listening to hip hop.

When you are discussing literature, you need to show a breadth of reading. However, beware of citation stacking - repeatedly listing many references after each sentence - without then critiquing them. This type of sentence is useful, especially at the start of a section, but can become overwhelming to read and overly descriptive, for example:

'A number of practitioners have sought to conduct full assessments of particular musical preferences, suggesting links between behaviour and certain genres' (Barlow et al., 1995; Williams, 2000; Bieber, 2010). It would be good to now more into a more analytical or evaluative place. You can find a list of critical sentence starters here (http://www.musostudy.com/resources/3SS/sentence-starters.pdf) which may help you to move into less descriptive and more critical writing.

A referencing system is used to ensure consistency when reporting academic texts. Check which system you institute uses (e.g. Harvard or APA) and ensure you use the guide they provide.

Editing

As Ernest Hemingway apparently said, *'The first draft of anything is shit'.* Do not submit your first draft, it always shows to the reader. A first draft is just that, a draft. It needs refining, reshaping, and reordering, maybe many times, until it is ready.

You are editing for clarity and comprehension, so check your work for spelling, punctuation and grammar, but also check for meaning. Does it flow from section to section? Have you introduced key facts at the correct stage? Do the sections all flow in the correct order? There are a couple of common spelling issues such as data - it is a plural - when you check a sentence with 'data' in it replace the word with 'numbers' to check you have written it correctly. E.g. Compare 'The data shows that the…' to 'The numbers shows that the…'. This highlights that the sentence should read 'The data show that the…'.

Edit with a fresh mind - allow time to draft and revise a few times before the hand-in deadline. If you plan some time away from your piece and come back to edit, you will be more objective. To proof-read your work, you can read it aloud to yourself, read it in a different font or on a different device, and ask someone else to read it. Get at least one other person to proof-read and sense check it for you.

Editing is a normal and expected part of writing and is a vital stage of writing. All writers and academics go over what they have written many times before they are happy with it.

The Report

The Title

The title is a summary of your study. It needs to catch your reader's attention - keep it brief, while ensuring the explanation of the study is clear.

A good title sets out:

- The purpose of the study
- The focus of the study
- The research participants
- The methodology used

Not all of these are always necessary - you need to decide what the important factors are. For example, is the fact that it is a qualitative study relevant? If so, you may want to reference that.

You must have a working title right from the start, however it can and will change. A working title will link to your key questions and help keep your work focussed. A working title is something that captures what you originally set out to do, which you can then change once you have finished the report. Use the working title to keep your writing focussed. Your examiners will ask themselves if this report addresses the title. (Thomas, 2013). With action research especially, you may wish your title to be a question - 'How do I improve..?' is a commonly used opening for action research.

Some examples of research titles:

- Popular musicians and instrumental teachers: the influence of informal learning on teaching strategies
- Enhancing Employability in Higher Education through Work Based Learning
- Leaning through storytelling: using reflection and experience in higher education contexts
- Towards an innovative pedagogical model to transform the delivery of Higher Education Popular Music in the UK: a focussed single institution study
- The role of personal development planning in enhancing effective learning in higher education

Planning the Structure

Plan before you write - you cannot write if you have not planned first; you cannot set out your ideas with clarity. Here is a suggested structure for a research report (Table 1.2):

These are only suggestions - it is important to for you to consider where you need to spend your word count to give the most meaning and value to the report. Your research may be very heavily literature-based and therefore you may need more words in the review, or you may have many surveys which will all need to take up some of the word count.

Table 1.2 The suggested structure and word count of a research report.

Suggested Structure:		Word Count:
i	Introduction	10%
ii	Literature review	30%
iii	Methodology	15%
iv	Results	5%
v	Discussion	30%
vi	Conclusion	10%

Always ask your supervisor if there is a suggested structure that is expected.

The Abstract

The abstract summarises your report, to give readers a clear idea of what the report is about. It is best to write this last, once everything else has been written, because then you will have a clear idea of what it is all about. It should have four components:

1. The research question and your aims
2. The methodology and any key methods used
3. A summary of your results and the discussion
4. A statement summarising your conclusion

It should explain the purpose of your research, setting it within the key theories/literature you are using. As Norton (2009) says: 'All research builds on research that has gone on before, and you need to demonstrate this' so include a few references to the key texts in your writing. You are summing up the aim of you research, what you are trying to achieve or demonstrate. Include what did you do to answer your aim, stating the approaches or methods used. State the main results and finally sum up your main message in the conclusion.

The abstract appears after the title and before the table of contents, on its own separate page.

The Introduction

While the introduction is not a large section, it is an important one. It will be the first thing to be read and is your opportunity to set out your research, set the tone and provide a brief guide to help steer the reader through. The introduction for your report should set out the following areas:

Initial background information to put the study into context

Some questions to consider when writing about the background to your research:

- Why is your research is worthwhile?
- What gap exists and what is the problem you wish to address?
- Why is this project important - it is not enough to say that it interests you - why might it be of interest, or be useful, to other people?

One way to set your background out is with the key texts you will use. Identify approximately five key texts (that will be prominent in your literature review) and make notes on why they are influencing your work, how they all fit together and how they will help drive your work forward. These notes will then help you set out the background.

Your introduction is also where terminology may need to be discussed to help the reader understand your work. (It may be useful to include a list of abbreviations or a glossary your document as well).

Explain the focus of the study

It is crucial to your report to explain why you are undertaking this study and to clarify the research areas covered. Link the focus to the background you just set out and then link it forward to your values.

Explain the value of your research

It is important to set out how your work adds value. It does not have to be a vast, significant advance to the world, but you do need to show that you are considering how your work contributes to its field.

The value of your work may be in an under researched area, it may look at a problem from a different viewpoint or it could be in a new, emerging field.

Describe the research problem and questions to be asked

This is where you bring all the information set out so far into describing the research problem. You need to explain how you will address your problem by designing research question(s) which your study will seek to answer. These questions will drive your research and form the basis for your discussion of the results and conclusions. From these questions you can then lead into a review to explore the background more thoroughly and show how you plan to answer these questions.

The Literature Review

Your literature review is a report of the survey of academic texts on your chosen area of research and the methodologies used. It gives an overview of current thinking and information, identifies what is relevant to your work and highlights any gaps in the existing research. You are trying to integrate and synthesise all the information you have read. This section needs to demonstrate that you:

- Are familiar with the writing around the subject
- Know what your position is in relation to others in the area
- Have identified any gaps in the area and can address how your work contributes to the area
- Have developed a theoretical framework for your research

Your review needs to show that you:

- Have reviewed appropriate peer-reviewed texts
- Have covered historical, current and the most up-to-date texts
- Have identified key works and authors in the area
- Have developed a logical argument
- Are analytical and critical of the texts (not just descriptive)
- Have considered opposing points of view

How you organise your literature review depends on the results and your interpretation of them. The structure of the review could be chronological, methodological, thematic or theoretical. As you bring together your review, look out for trends and patterns. Are there main themes which recur? Are there debates or contradictions in the texts? Is there a key publication, author or group?

A chronological review is quite simple but risks becoming merely a descriptive list on a time line. If your field has been researched in many ways, you may wish to organise the data methodologically, for example, considering quantitative and qualitative results separately. Or you may wish to consider results from educational research separately to sociological research. If you

have identified main themes in your review, you could organise results into thematic sections. Alternatively, if your work hinges on key theories, you could group the work by those theories.

Another format you could use is a funnel structure. You start with a broad outline and gradually go down the funnel, becoming more specific:

- General statements
- Discussion about the research area
- Aspects of the problem that has already been studied
- Identification of a gap in the research
- Purpose of your study
- Your contribution

However you organise this section, it will need an introduction, main body and conclusion. The introduction will establish the focus and remit of the review. The main body is where you will describe, analyse and critically evaluate the works you have read. Interpret and synthesise the works, showing how they inform your research. The conclusion is a summary of your review, discussing its significance to this research.

Some good questions to keep in mind as you shape your review are:

- Why is the subject important?
- Who else thinks it is important?
- Who has worked on this subject before?
- Who has done something similar to what I am doing?
- What can be adapted for my own study?
- What are the gaps in the research?
- What is my contribution to the field?
- What specific questions do I answer?
- What use is my project to others?

Being critical does not just relate to the way you write about texts, it also concerns how you select and read them. For example, you could critique where and how you sourced texts and you could critique the way you approached a group of texts - as individual pieces or relating to each other.

The table below (Table 1.3) shows some examples of where descriptive and critical writing can be useful when dealing with texts.

Table 1.3 Examples of Descriptive and Critical use in Literature Reviews

Descriptive:	Critical:
Introduction/setting the scene	Structure of your literature review
Chronology of texts read	Your selection of texts
Methodologies etc. used in the texts	How you categorise texts
Findings of the texts	Comparisons made across texts
	Implications of texts discussed
	Gap established in the texts

The Methodology

The methodology section discusses the methods you used to conduct your research. It describes what you did and how you did it, and includes a justification of your choices and evaluation of its successfulness. This section allows readers to evaluate your research for its validity and reliability. This section is usually written in the past tense, talking about the work you have undertaken.

The methodology contains the type of research, how you generated and collected data, data analysis, any tools used (e.g. software for analysing data or statistical analysis formulae) and your rationale for the chosen methodology. Again, ensure you critically evaluate as well as describe your methods.

There are four main parts to your methodology:

1. Explain your methodological approach
2. Describe the methods used for data generation/gathering
3. Describe the methods used for analysis of data
4. Evaluate and justify your methodological approach

This section is about showing how and why you applied your research methods. You need to describe your methods and choices, but it is a justification and critique of the choices you made and needs to show how rigorously and ethically you conducted the research.

You need to show how your methods suit your research questions. Keep the aims of your research in mind and relate your methodology back to those aims. By using relevant academic texts, you can strengthen your arguments. Discuss any difficulties you experienced in conducting the research and explain how you minimised their impact.

The Results - Dealing with Data

Discussing the significance of your results will happen in the discussion section, here you are reporting the results not exploring them. In this section you are describing and analysing the results and organising them meaningfully to strengthen your claims and show how you have answered your research questions.

When dealing with quantitative data, the easiest way to present them is in table, chart or graph form (remember to label them clearly). You will need to carry out some statistical analysis using the methods described in your methodology. Use the results to highlight trends, relationships and any differences you find.

In qualitative research, you will report key themes or topics that emerged from your analysis. For each part, you can support your results with quotations. Use quotes which bring the theme to life rather than just describe the theme. For example:

The students, in the majority, talked about how if they did not find a module interesting they would disengage. Boring was a term that came up frequently with one student saying '*Even the tutor looked bored*'.

The quote used here does not say '*If a module is not not interesting I will disengage*'. The quote used takes the reader slightly deeper and is more interesting. Make sure your quotes drive the argument forward, helping to strengthen your case.

The Discussion

Here you are evaluating your results, showing how they relate to the whole aim of the project, how they answer the research questions, how they link to the literature review. You are building your argument to support your overall conclusion. You may want to organise your discussion around your research questions or the themes that emerged. There are four key parts to your discussion:

1. Interpreting what the results mean
2. Explaining the Implications of the research
3. Discussing the limitations, what the results cannot speak to
4. Recommendations for further research

Interpreting what the results mean

The form of your interpretations will depend on the type of research, but some typical approaches to interpreting the data include:

- Identifying relationships in the data
- Discussing whether or not the results support your original claim
- Give context to your results by linking back to other research or theories
- Discuss unexpected results and their significance
- Consider alternative explanations
- Make the argument for your position

Explaining the Implications of the research

As you discuss your interpretation of the results, also relate your work to previous work that you have looked at in your literature review. Ask yourself how do your results fit into existing knowledge? Are there any differences? What new knowledge are you contributing? Is there any conflict with other work, or does this confirm previous thoughts?

Discussing the limitations, what the results cannot speak to

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of your work. Not just where you made errors, but also being clear about what your work cannot do (conclusions that cannot be made). There may be limitations because of the design, the methodology or unanticipated problems. Discuss just the limitations that are directly related to your research.

Recommendations for further research

The recommendations you make will be based on the discussion of your results looking at implementation or further research. Add in the considerations that need to be considered for the further research.

The Conclusion

This final section is a summary and reflection of the research and a restatement of the research question. It shows the key implications and recommendations of the research and highlights any new knowledge you have contributed. It should aim to give the reader clarity and an understanding of the key achievements, arguments and discoveries of the work. It does not need to be a long, wordy section - aim for a concise summing up in an engaging manner.

You may find there are some overlaps with the discussion. The conclusion is more general, making broad statements that sum up the work. There are no new data, interpretations, or arguments introduced here.

References

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