

**How to Write Business Reports Right:
Tips Your English Teacher Never Told You**

How many times in your professional career have you been asked to write a report for upper management or key stakeholders? How many drafts and corrections and edits did you have to go through before you were confident that what you said was needed, understood, and acted upon? The following tips on writing can build your confidence.

As in building most products, report writing will be easier if you follow a logical process. Try the following steps to produce a professional report:

1. **Start early:** Writing a readable, actionable, and accurate report takes time. Plan for
 - researching the latest data
 - analyzing it to support a clear message
 - understanding what your readers need to learn
 - writing a professional, credible, actionable report
2. **Know your readers' needs:** As with all products, your business report needs to meet the needs of the user, in this case, your readers. Perhaps your report is to management about your department's performance. Or maybe you are proposing action to your non-profit board that will forge an important alliance. Or you are a government employee who has researched various options for procuring services vital to your municipal water treatment facility. Each of these communications will be different, based on the subject and what your readers need to know to take action.

3. **Outline the essentials:** Useful reports depend on a logical flow of information to support the reports' objectives. The most efficient way to guarantee the right amount of information necessary to support options or recommendations is for you to create an outline, just like you were taught to do in school. An added benefit to outlining your message is that it is quick and provides you with a way to test your message flow with others, before you invest more time in drafting your written report. Maybe they will tell you to gather more data. Maybe you forgot to include an essential argument supporting your recommendation. Someone may even be able to add to your message with a useful graph or convincing anecdote to support your case.
4. **Write:** Ultimately you need to pound out your message on your computer, record your voice, or maybe scratch it onto paper with a lead pencil and a big eraser, whatever supports your communications flow. Don't sweat the first draft. Just spill your words onto the proverbial page.
5. **Edit, edit, edit...** It is in this step that time, patience, and attention to detail is required. It may help you if you do your first edits yourself, then have someone else read it to see if they understand what you wrote and agree with your facts and presentation style. Grammatical guides can assist you to go beyond your computer's spell and grammar checks to ensure your document has professional polish. *The Consulting Team* recommends two reference books that can help you with this task: The Business Writer's Handbook, by Alfred, Brusaw, and Oliu and Eats, Shoots and Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation, by Lynne Truss.

Follow these steps and you will find your reports becoming more professional, informative, and useful to your readers in guiding their business activities and decisions. For more training and practice on this essential skill, email us at M@TheConsultingTeam.com to book one of our business writing classes: “Business Writing Basics” or “Writing Effective Staff Reports,” or to schedule an individual coaching session.