Writing Technical Reports

What are technical reports?

Technical reports come in a variety of shapes and sizes, ranging from your basic letter or email, to the several-hundred-page documents agencies the EPA and SEC produce. Technical reports seek to convey information, analyze a situation, or make recommendations. They must be so clear and convincing that readers decide to act on the conclusions or recommendations offered.

What do they include?

Front matter. Different reports offer different sorts of front matter—i.e., the materials that precede a report's introduction and body. Distinctions between the types of front matter reports include often depend upon the reports' length and depth. Among the most common materials one may use as front matter are the following:

- *Title page*. The title page includes a title that indicates the report's subject and purpose. It should also list the names of the report's principle readers and principle preparers, the date, and the name or logo of the writer's organization.
- *Abstract*. The abstract offers a summary of the document's contents; the length usually ranges between 150 and 300 words. By reading the abstract, the reader should know what information the document will convey. Depending upon the type of abstract a writer uses—whether descriptive or informative—the abstract may or may not convey the document's findings.
- *Table of contents*. The table of content conveys both the organization and scope of the document. It should use the same headings as the document, thereby employing parallel structure. If the document uses sub-headings, so should the table of contents.
- *Executive summary*. The executive summary distills the report's essence and is addressed to a manager. Given its audience, this section offers a sense of the document's scope and foregrounds such information as costs and time involved. Is should be about 5% as long as the document proper (1 page for a 20-page report).

Body. The body is the meat of the report. It addresses all the materials that are introduced in the front matter. Many reports divide the body into the following sections:

- *Introduction*. The introduction prepares readers to understand the document. It orients the reader to the report's subject, purpose, background, sources, scope, findings, and recommendations.
- *Methods*. The methods section explains the research and experiments the document's principle preparers performed. Often, this section's organization incorporates a listing technique (i.e. bullet points).

Body, cont'd.:

- *Results*. The results section offers a neutral explanation of the report's findings. The emphasis here is on building a critical mass of reasoning and evidence that will allow the preparers to draw well-formed conclusions in the conclusions section. Often the results section is the longest section a writer will include in a technical report.
- *Conclusions*. The conclusions section interprets the results. Explain your reasoning and emphasize causal connection.
- *Recommendations*. The recommendations section functions as a call to action. Having presented findings and drawn conclusions from them, this section then proposes a next step. Like the methods section, the recommendations section often includes a list technique.

Back matter. A technical report's back matter accomplishes 2 purposes: (1) it gives credit to sources and (1) it presents materials that would become a digression if they appeared in the body section. Among elements writers often include in back matter are the following:

- *Glossary*. A glossary is a list of definitions. You may include a glossary in a technical report if it uses a number of terms with which readers may not be familiar. When including a glossary, note its existence in a footnote in the body of the report.
- *References*. You also may refer to a report's reference section as a "Bibliography" or "Works Cited," depending on the style you're using. Cite all the sources the report quotes, paraphrases, or summarizes.
- *Appendix*. Appendices may include maps, diagrams, or computations that would not fit in the body of the report. Label appendices with letters (i.e. Appendix A, Appendix B, and so on).