

Reports and Essays: Key Differences.

This handout describes general features of academic reports and essays. It is likely that in your disciplines or subject areas only some of these features will apply. Also, there may be other requirements which are not included here.

There is no one right way to write a report or an essay. For reports, it depends on your discipline and the nature of the report. For essays, you select the content and structure, with a focus on sense and flow. For essays, different disciplines may require different types of information in an introduction, or want less of some aspects. For example, in some disciplines the background and context is quite short; some prefer little discussion of the issues or literature before you begin the main body, and some prefer that you only briefly signpost the topic.

Please do check your subject conventions. Also, check your course or module handbook and any instructions given to you by your lecturers.

This handout has a table which compares reports and essays point-by-point. It then provides an outline of the *standard* structure of a report. However, do bear in mind that what you have to do will depend on your discipline, the purpose of the report and its audience. After that, the handout provides an outline of the structure of essays.

Table of distinctions between reports and essays.

Reports.	Essays.
Reports have a table of contents.	Essays do not.
Reports are divided into headed and numbered sections and, sometimes, sub-sections. The format is IMRaD (see below).	Essays are not divided. However, you may have separate headed appendices.
Reports often originate from outside the academic world. They are typical of the writing required for the world of work.	Essays originate in academic settings, including practice-based subjects.
Reports often present data and findings that you have collected yourself, for example through a survey, experiment or case study. Some reports focus on applying theory to your field of work.	Essays usually focus on analysing or evaluating theories, past research by other people, and ideas. They may include applying theory to practice if you are in a practice-based field.

A report usually contains tables, charts and diagrams.	Essays do not usually include tables, charts, or diagrams.
Reports usually include descriptions of the methods used.	Essays should not usually refer to the methods you used to arrive at your conclusions.
The discussion in a report often includes comments on how the research could be improved and extended, and may include evaluation of the methods and processes.	Essays do not usually reflect on the actual process of researching and writing the essay itself.
Reports sometimes include recommendations.	Essays do not include recommendations.

Table adapted from Cottrell, 2003, p. 209.

The structure of reports.

Most reports use an **IMRaD** structure: **I**ntroduction, **M**ethods, **R**esults and **D**iscussion. Here are some common sections that also appear in reports. Please note that there are alternative terms for some sections.

Table of Contents.

Here you set out the number of each section, its title and page number and any sub-sections. Sub-section numbers and details start under the section title, not the margin or the number.

Abstract, sometimes called an Executive Summary.

This provides a very brief summary of the report and is usually the last thing you write.

Introduction.

This describes the purpose of the report, explains why it necessary and/or useful, and sets out its precise aims and objectives.

Literature Review.

This describes current research and thinking about the problem or research question. It is often incorporated into the introduction.

Methods (or methodology)

This describes and justifies the methods or processes used to collect the data.

Results, also sometimes called Findings.

This only presents the results (or processed data) from the research. Therefore, it may consist mainly of, for example, tables, charts and/or diagrams.

Discussion, sometimes called Analysis or Interpretation.

This analyses the results and evaluates the research carried out.

Conclusion.

This summarises the report, and usually revisits the aims and objectives.

Recommendations.

If required, this is where the writer uses the results and conclusions of the report to make practical suggestions about the problem or issue.

Appendices.

If required, you can include any raw data or materials the report refers to in the appendix. The data is often presented in the form of, for example, charts, diagrams and tables. They are numbered: for example, write Table 1 and its title; Table 2 and its title, and so on as needed.

The Structure of Essays.

Introduction.

This contextualises and gives background information about the topic or questions being discussed. It sets out what the essay is going to cover.

Main Body.

This is divided into paragraphs, which help make a continuous, flowing text.

Conclusion.

This summarises the main points made in the essay. You should never put new information in the conclusion.

Bibliography, or Reference List.

This is usually presented alphabetically by authors' surname.

Reference for the Table of Distinctions above.

Cottrell, S. (2003). *The Study Skills Handbook* (2nd ed.). Basingstoke: Palgrave.

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