

10 Practical Strategies for More Effective Report Writing

Writing reports is like cooking Thai food. It's ninety percent preparation and ten percent cooking. Most people skip or skim over the preparation stage and start composing as soon as possible. Big mistake.

It may seem counterintuitive, but the more time you spend on the prep, the sooner you will have a final draft.

Here is what I have learned working with hundreds of professionals in scores of disciplines in over 100 organizations on five continents. If there is any 'secret' to writing effective reports, it would be: Ask lots of questions.

Many professionals, especially in the early stages of their career, are reluctant to ask questions out of fear this somehow makes them look bad. Quite the opposite. If you have been tasked with writing a report, asking questions is part of your job. Here are some of the key questions you need to ask.

1. Who wants this report and why?

Treat the first answer as a starting point because it is almost never sufficiently specific. A typical answer might be: *The donor wants quarterly reports.*

Now look at the same question after a little who, what, why, where, when and how questioning.

The Contract & Compliance Officer in the Donor's Asia Pacific Office needs to report to headquarters on country progress towards KPIs so they can decide on next year's budget.

Always drill down as far as you can on the who and why. Get names if you can. Look them up on LinkedIn. What's motivating their request for this report?

2. What is the deadline?

This seems like an obvious question, but there are hard and soft deadlines, real and fake deadlines. I have worked with managers who consistently give staff false deadlines thinking they are 'building in a safety buffer'. What they are in fact doing is teaching staff "we always have a few days leeway".

Always ask: What will happen if we miss this deadline? Then you will know into which category it falls.

3. Is there a preferred structure, style and length?

I have seen too many professionals write down everything they can think of in tedious detail so they 'don't leave anything out'. The manager comes back and says, *Make it less than 10 pages, take that out, put this in, less detail here, more there.* People think this is normal. It is not. It is inefficient.

Ask: Is there a template or structure for this? Is there a style guideline? Approximately how many pages are we looking at?



4. Have I got all the data and information I need on hand?

Let's revisit the Thai cooking analogy. You would not get out the wok and cook the noodles then go to the supermarket because you realize you are out of rice vinegar and peanut butter then come back and mix the sauce ingredients and go back to the supermarket for eggs. Unfortunately, that is how many people approach writing a report. Better to have everything you need on hand before you start.

5. Spend time on the planning

Once you have answers to the basic questions, you are ready to start planning. Try the 'layers' approach. This can be done individually or as a brainstorming task with a group.

- First pass: Start with your main section headings. Leave lots of space in between if you are using paper or a whiteboard. Yes, it looks like a table of contents.
- Second pass: Add some subheadings.
- Third pass: Add some more subheadings.
- Fourth pass: Add notes under subheadings.
- Fifth pass: Make short notes about what you plan to write about for each topic.

Here is what it might look like, but you can be as 'messy' as you like with this.

First pass	Second pass	Third pass
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How Policy Enables Transformation • Food System Typologies • Modern Food Systems • Mixed Food Systems • Traditional Food Systems • Entry Points for Policy Change • Global Policy • Finance • Cross Cutting Policy Considerations • Conclusion 	<p>Entry Points for Policy Change</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reducing emissions and building resilience • Food loss and waste • Policies to address diets for health and the environment • Policies to address inequality, power dynamics, and trade-offs 	<p>Reducing emissions and building resilience</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • e.g. policies reducing emissions • e.g. policies resilience • Promoting, strengthening extension

Fourth pass	Fifth pass	Tip
<p>Reducing emissions and building resilience</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • e.g. policies for reducing emissions ○ Mozambique's framework ○ New York State Climate Resilient Farming Program 	<p>Mozambique framework see 2012 Strategy; say how strategies reduce emissions; make food systems nutrient rich</p>	<p>Create a new folder and dump all your papers, links and notes in one place.</p>



6. Get feedback on the plan

I know, you are itching to start composing, but this step will save you hours of time.

Circulate your annotated plan to anyone and everyone you think should be involved or is interested. Especially circulate the plan to your manager. Time and again I have seen staff labour for days on a draft report only to be told: *Don't need that section. Why didn't you include this? Add a section on that. Don't use that example.* Getting feedback at this stage ensures you are on the right track.

7. Start composing a draft

Now that you have a detailed plan the composing stage will go much faster than if you started here.

8. Get feedback on your draft

Be specific when you ask for feedback. Do not ask, *Could you look this over for me?* Ask, *"If you have a few minutes before Wednesday noon, could you look this over and see if there are any gaps or too much or not enough detail or any logical inconsistencies? I am not asking you to correct grammar and spelling, I will do that later.* Giving people the implicit deadline is important. Be sure to thank people for their comments.

9. Revise and copyedit

You will almost always get useful feedback. Make the revisions and then copyedit. Hate to copyedit? Most people do. This will help: *The 5-minute guide to the 7 most useful software tools for copyediting your work.* You can get the free download here: <https://terryerleteaches.com/sign-up-for-our-free-resources/>

10. Send

You may get requests from the receiver for more revisions, but that is OK because *you met the deadline!*



About this resource

10 Practical Strategies for More Effective Report Writing is covered in our flagship course, *Beyond Grammar: Writing as thinking made visible*. You can enroll in the course here: www.terryerleteaches.com

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If you have suggestions for how I could improve this resource or for other free resources that would be useful, please contact me at clayton@redplough.com

Thank you for signing up to my mailing list.

Terry Erle Clayton

