

U3Ch4. Understanding the structure of reports

PAPER 01 — Communicative Skills

Unit 3 · Written Communication

Chapter 4 · Understanding the Structure of Reports

(Title · Summary · Introduction · Findings · Recommendations)

1 Why a Fixed Structure Matters

A formal report is a decision-making tool. Its **structure turns raw data into insight and insight into action**. A predictable sequence—Title → Summary → Introduction → Findings → Recommendations—lets busy readers:

1. **Locate information instantly** (skimmability).
2. **Assess credibility** (method and evidence appear before opinions).
3. **Compare multiple reports easily** (standard headings).
4. **Act quickly** (clear recommendations anchored in evidence).

Think of a report as a courtroom case: Title = case file, Summary = verdict preview, Introduction = opening statement, Findings = evidence, Recommendations = sentence/proposed remedy.

2 Title (and Title Page) — Your First Impression

Element	Purpose	Best-Practice Tips	Example
Clear Topic	Signal exactly what the report covers	Include key variable(s), timeframe, and organisation	“Q2 2025 Customer Satisfaction Analysis — Southern Region”
Concise Length	Aid citation, storage, memory	10–15 words; avoid jargon	“Feasibility Study for Solar Rooftop Project, Jaipur Plant”
Metadata	Enable version control and accountability	Date, author, department, confidentiality label	Confidential — Prepared for Board Review · 21 Jul 2025

Design notes:

- Use 16–18 pt bold, centred.
- Add company logo (top-left) and document ID (bottom-right) for large organisations.
- If distributed externally, include contact info (email, phone).

3 Executive Summary (or Abstract) — The 60-Second Snapshot

Aspect	Guidance
Length	≤ 10 % of total word count or 1 page max for reports up to 40 pp
Audience	Senior decision-makers who may read nothing else
Content Checklist (PRIME)	Purpose (why report exists) · Range (scope) · Important Findings (headline data) · Major Conclusions · Essential Recommendations
Tone	Neutral, factual—avoid “we believe”; use past tense for findings, present for recommendations

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Aspect	Guidance
Common Pitfall	Copy-pasting intro instead of writing a standalone mini-report
Micro-template (≈ 150-200 words)	
<i>Purpose:</i> “This report analyses ...” <i>Range:</i> “Data from Jan-Jun 2025 across 4 plants ...” <i>Findings:</i> “Defect rate fell 12 %, exceeding target by 2 points.” <i>Conclusions:</i> “Automation in line 3 drove majority of gains.” <i>Recommendations:</i> “Extend automation to lines 1, 2 by Q4; invest ₹1.2 cr with projected 14-month payback.”	

4 Introduction — Orienting the Reader

Sub-Section	Key Questions Answered	Notes
Background / Context	<i>What situation led to this report?</i>	Brief history, previous studies, regulatory triggers
Objectives / Purpose	<i>What does the report intend to achieve?</i>	Use bullet list for multi-objective studies
Scope & Limitations	<i>What's included, excluded, or constrained?</i>	Clarify time period, geography, data gaps
Methodology Overview	<i>How was information gathered and analysed?</i>	Tools, data sources, sampling; full details can move to appendix

Writing Tips

1. **Start broad → narrow** (“Global demand for lithium has risen ... therefore this plant ...”).
2. Use **present tense** for permanent context, **past tense** for completed research steps.
3. Limit to **1-2 pages** unless a complex technical study.

5 Findings (Discussion / Analysis) — The Evidence Engine

5.1 Organisation Strategies

Strategy	When to Use	Example Heading Set
Chronological	Time-series studies, project retrospectives	“4.1 Pre-Implementation Metrics” → “4.2 Post-Implementation Metrics”
Thematic / Topical	Market research, HR climate survey	“4.1 Employee Engagement” → “4.2 Career Development”
Comparative	A/B tests, benchmark reports	“4.1 System A Performance” vs. “4.2 System B Performance”
Geographical	Multi-site or regional analyses	“4.1 North Zone” → “4.2 South Zone”

5.2 Design Elements

Element	Purpose	Best Practice
Sub-Headings (H2/H3)	Break down complex findings	One idea per sub-heading; parallel grammar
Charts & Tables	Visualise trends, relationships	Label clearly; cite source; interpret in text (“Figure 2 shows ...”)
Call-out Boxes	Highlight critical stats or quotes	Use shaded box; <40 words
Cross-References	Link to appendices or prior sections	“See Appendix B for raw survey data.”

5.3 Commentary vs. Raw Data

- **Data first, interpretation immediately after:** present figure, then explain what it means.
- Use **neutral language** ("increased by 8 %") rather than judgmental ("shot up").
- Flag limitations honestly ("Sample size in Q4 was 20 % smaller due to sensor outage.").

6 Recommendations — Converting Insight into Action

Component	Description	Example
Specific Action	Start with an imperative verb	"Upgrade conveyor motors in lines 1-3."
Justification	Link back to findings (evidence)	"Will reduce downtime by estimated 11 % (Finding 4.2)."
Benefits / Impact	Quantify gains where possible	"ROI expected within 14 months; NPV ₹37 lakh."
Owner & Timeline	Accountability drives execution	"Maintenance Dept.; complete by 30 Nov 2025."
Priority Ranking	Helps allocate limited resources	High / Medium / Low or numeric ranking

Formatting Tips

- Use **numbered list** for clarity.
- If more than five recommendations, group by theme (e.g., *Technology* · *Process* · *People*).
- Optionally include "**Cost vs. Impact**" matrix graphic for quick executive scan.

7 Connecting the Sections — Flow & Cross-Checks

Checkpoint	What to Verify
Title → Summary	Does the summary mirror the key promise of the title?
Summary → Introduction	Does the introduction expand (not repeat) the summary?
Introduction → Findings	Do findings address each stated objective?
Findings → Recommendations	Is every recommendation traceable to at least one finding?
Recommendations → Title	Do proposed actions align with the overarching topic?

A mismatch at any checkpoint signals missing data, scope creep, or unsupported opinions.

8 Common Pitfalls & Quick Fixes

Pitfall	Symptom	Fix
"Data Dump" Findings	Long tables with no narrative	Insert interpretation paragraphs; highlight key numbers
Bloated Summary	Reads like first three pages of report	Rewrite using PRIME checklist; keep <1 page
Intro Overload	History lesson spanning 4 pages	Move background detail to appendix; keep intro lean
Recommendation Vagueness	"Improve training"	Specify who, what metric, deadline
Title Ambiguity	"Operations Report"	Add scope and period: "Operations Efficiency Report — Jan-Jun 2025"



9 Quick-Reference Template (4 pp Example)

Page	Heading	Word Guide
1	Title Page + Executive Summary	300 words
2	1. Introduction	400 words
2-3	2. Findings	800 words + 2 charts
4	3. Recommendations	300 words + cost-impact table

Use this for short managerial reports; scale section lengths proportionally for larger studies.

10 Self-Practice Corner

- Reverse-Outline Drill**
 - Take an existing report. Strip away headings. Write the five-section skeleton. Does every part exist and flow?
- Summary Sprint**
 - Summarise a 10-page article into a 200-word executive summary using PRIME. Peer-review for completeness.
- Findings Makeover**
 - Transform a raw data table into a findings subsection with a chart and commentary.
- Recommendation Builder**
 - For each finding in practice #3, craft one SMART recommendation (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound).
- Checkpoint Audit**
 - Use the flow checklist (Section 7) on your next report draft; log any misalignments and revise.

Chapter Takeaways

- **Title** frames scope and ownership; keep it precise.
- **Executive Summary** delivers the entire story in miniature—perfect for skimmers and executives.
- **Introduction** provides context, objectives, and methods so readers trust the evidence.
- **Findings** present data plus interpretation through clear headings, visuals, and neutral language.
- **Recommendations** translate evidence into actionable, prioritised steps tied to benefits and owners.

Master this five-part structure, and every report you craft will guide readers smoothly from question to confidence—and from confidence to action.