

U3Ch4. Understanding the structure of reports

PAPER 01 — Communicative Skills

Unit 3 · Written Communication

Chapter 4 · Understanding the Structure of Reports

(Title \cdot Summary \cdot Introduction \cdot Findings \cdot 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	\leq 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) · R ange (scope) · I mportant Findings (headline data) · M ajor Conclusions · E ssential 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)

Purpose: "This report analyses ..."

Range: "Data from Jan-Jun 2025 across 4 plants ..."

Findings: "Defect rate fell 12 %, exceeding target by 2 points." Conclusions: "Automation in line 3 drove majority of gains."

Recommendations: "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	What situation led to this report?	Brief history, previous studies, regulatory triggers
Objectives / Purpose	What does the report intend to achieve?	Use bullet list for multi-objective studies
Scope & Limitations	What's included, excluded, or constrained?	Clarify time period, geography, data gaps
Methodology Overview	How was information gathered and analysed?	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 / Topica	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	s "See Appendix B for raw survey data."

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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	s "Improve training"	Specify who, what metric, deadline
Title Ambiguity	"Operations Report"	Add scope and period: "Operations Efficiency Report — Jan-Jun 2025"

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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

1. Reverse-Outline Drill

 Take an existing report. Strip away headings. Write the five-section skeleton. Does every part exist and flow?

2. Summary Sprint

• Summarise a 10-page article into a 200-word executive summary using PRIME. Peer-review for completeness.

3. Findings Makeover

o Transform a raw data table into a findings subsection with a chart and commentary.

4. Recommendation Builder

• For each finding in practice #3, craft one SMART recommendation (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound).

5. 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.

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