# Best Practices for Business Writing

## Focus on Report Formatting and Style

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**Presented  by**

**The Student Learning Commons**

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# This presentation will ...

❑Highlight main differences between business and academic writing
❑Describe formatting and organization for informal business reports (task, progress)
❑Overview some basics of information design:
    ❑visuals
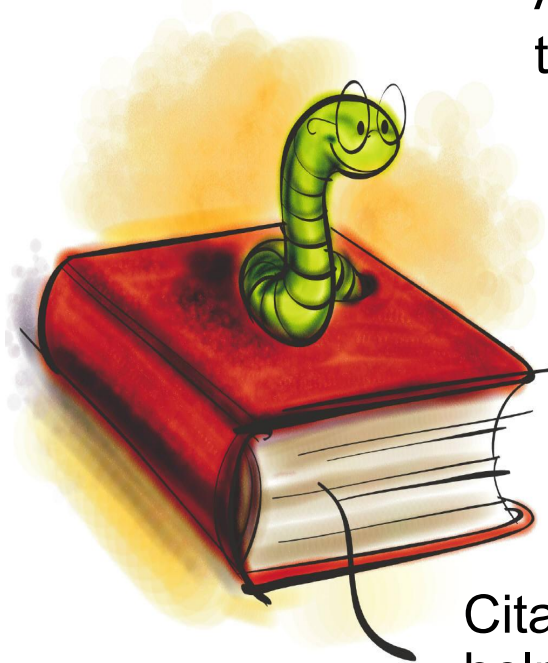    ❑"chunking"
    ❑techniques for clear and concise writing

# Most academic writing has…

An intro/body/conclusion structure usually held together by an overarching thesis statement

A tradition of moving readers gradually through the evidence being presented

"Well-developed," often lengthy, paragraphs that convey and support a sustained argument

Citations—references to other sources—to help justify and support the arguments. These are parenthetical (MLA/APA) or footnotes/endnotes.
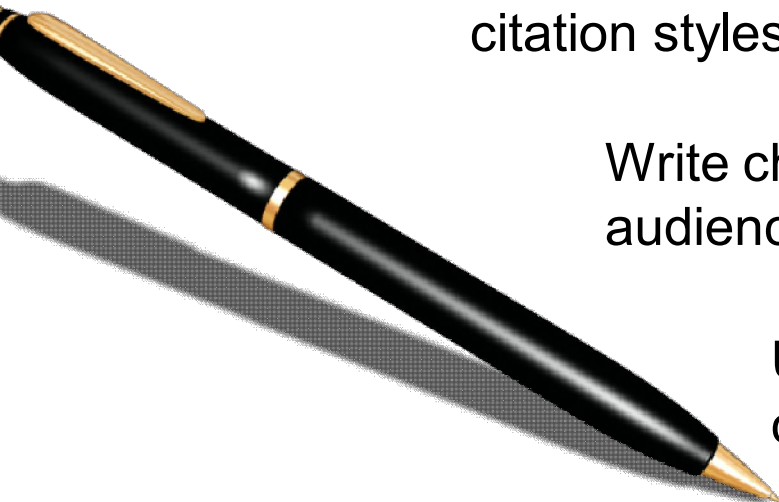
# Business writers…

Do **not** use an essay structure or standard academic citation styles

Write chiefly to provide information to a given audience and/or to influence decision-making

Use formatting and information-design to convey information most efficiently

Value concision as well as correctness of expression

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# Consider your PURPOSE

In business communication, you…

❑ **transfer knowledge** from a person who knows it to a person who needs to know it (adapted from Saul Carliner, Information Designer's Toolkit)

❑ **convince readers**--through content, clarity, and appropriateness of presentation--*to do something* with this knowledge.  Indeed, much business communication *is persuasive*.*

*This link will directly download a PowerPoint presentation by the Purdue Online Writing Lab (or you can go to the Purdue OWL business writing page).

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# Consider your TARGET AUDIENCE

Ask the following questions:

❑ *Who* are the primary readers (in other words, who are the main stakeholders)?

Are they decision makers? Specialists? Problem-solvers? Clients?  General readers seeking practical info?

❑ *What* do I want readers to know?

❑ *Why* do I want readers to know this?

❑ *How* much background knowledge do the primary readers already have?

❑ Are there secondary readers…and what stake do they have in the document?

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# Informal business reports…

**Purpose:** provide routine information to a "regular" reader. They tend to

❑ use MEMO format

❑ be brief, side-stepping detailed documentation

❑ assume the target reader already has background.

# Task reports…

**…may fulfill several purposes:**

❑ Recommend an action

❑ Justify a solution

❑ Record/document an inspection or process

❑ Provide information (without a recommendation)

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# Progress reports…



❑Are part of almost all long-range projects

❑Summarize the progress, status, and projections related to a project

❑Answer a variety of audience questions: i.e. what has been accomplished, what resources have been used, is the project on schedule, what plans need to be altered, what happens next

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# Skeleton of an informal report ...

**TO:**
**FROM:**
**DATE:**
**SUBJECT:**
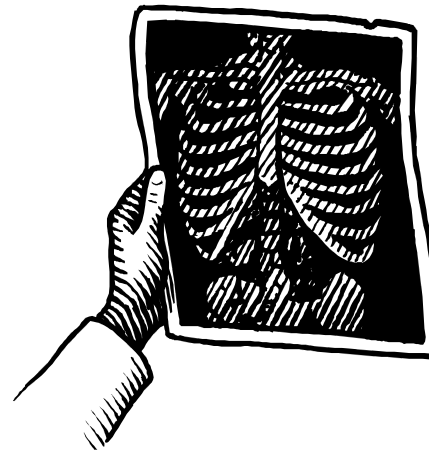**=========**

**Work Completed**

**Current Status of X**

**Current Status of Y**

**Work Remaining**

**Overall Status**

CC: ____

# Organizing report contents...

Order tasks and information according to **a logical sequence** that will most efficiently fulfill your **PURPOSE** and **AUDIENCE**'S needs.

Common patterns of organization include…

❑ chronological order
❑ order of descending priority
❑ order of value or interest for your target audience

*Do not* organize your report as if it were an essay.

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# Organizing report contents...

For example, if you're preparing a recommendation report…

❑ Explain the problem and its causes
❑ Recommend specific changes
❑ Explain why the changes will be beneficial

*Do not* leave the recommendations to the end, as if they were part of the conclusion to an essay.

# Organizing report contents ...

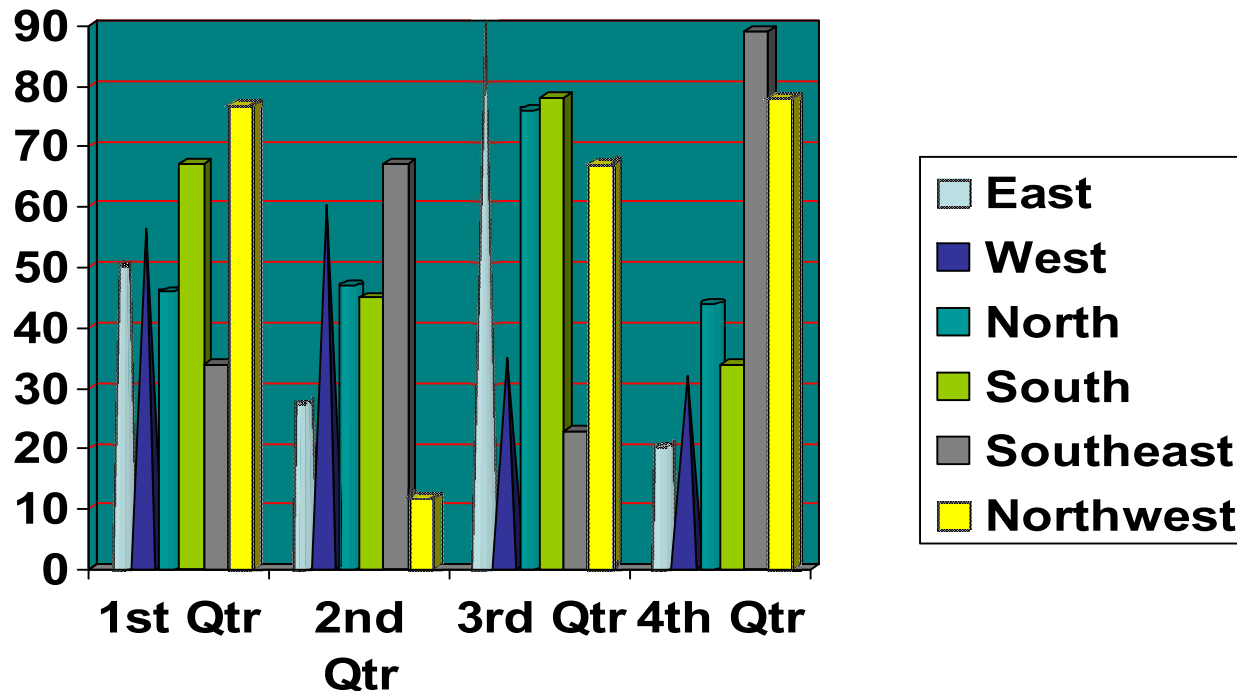This is a typical organizational scheme for a progress report

➔

**TO:**
**FROM:**
**DATE:**
**SUBJECT:**
**=========**

**Work Completed**

**Current Status of X**

**Current Status of Y**

**Work Remaining**

**Overall Status**

CC: ____

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# Information design:  visuals...

| Task | Week1 | Week 2 | Week 3 |
|------|-------|--------|--------|
| Task A | → | → |  |
| Task B | → |  |  |
| Task C |  | → |  |
| Task D |  | → |  |

Incorporate **visuals** for more "richness" of information, accuracy, and impact.

# Information design: "how not"! ...



Don't let your visuals get over-complicated!  Readers
will not be able to process the information effectively.

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# Information design: "how not!…"

A typical "well developed" essay paragraph tends to look like this… ➔

**Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetuer adipiscing elit. Suspendisse metus erat, scelerisque sed, placerat a, suscipit quis, est. Sed ut turpis ut massa molestie commodo. Mauris ultrices augue quis velit. Cras cursus. Sed et felis. Phasellus non mi ac est convallis rutrum. Ut eros lacus, auctor non, luctus dapibus, venenatis at, lorem. Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetuer adipiscing elit. Fusce a diam vitae turpis suscipit malesuada. Curabitur sodales. Etiam risus. Aenean dui. Vivamus fringilla eros id orci. Etiam sagittis, libero sit amet eleifend laoreet, magna mi rutrum erat, eget dictum nibh ligula ac turpis. Integer imperdiet. Nunc et magna. Vivamus elementum vulputate augue. In vulputate lacus vel orci. Curabitur mattis. In pharetra commodo odio. Aenean elementum nunc vitae ipsum. Cras leo. Aliquam quis ligula. Aliquam dapibus tincidunt neque. Cras volutpat vestibulum magna. Ut tincidunt nisl eu lacus. Sed sodales. Class aptent taciti sociosqu ad litora torquent per conubia nostra, per inceptos hymenaeos. Proin mauris orci, ultrices non, auctor sit amet, molestie quis, tortor. Vestibulum imperdiet aliquet odio.**

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# Information design: use "chunking"

"Chunking" allows your target reader to process information more easily and efficiently…  ➜

"Chunking" techniques include white **space**, informative **headers**, and bulleted **lists**.

**Lorem ipsum**
Dolor sit amet, consectetuer adipiscing elit. Suspendisse metus erat, scelerisque sed, placerat a, suscipit quis, est. Sed ut turpis ut massa molestie commodo. Mauris ultrices augue quis velit.
- Cras cursus. Sed et felis.
- Phasellus non mi ac est convallis rutrum.
- Ut eros lacus, auctor non, luctus dapibus, venenatis at, lorem.

Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetuer adipiscing elit. Fusce a diam vitae turpis suscipit malesuada.

**Curabitur sodales**
Etiam risus. Aenean dui. Vivamus fringilla eros id orci. Etiam sagittis, libero sit amet eleifend laoreet, magna mi rutrum erat, eget dictum nibh ligula ac turpis. Integer imperdiet.

**Nunc et magna**
Vivamus elementum vulputate augue. In vulputate lacus vel orci. Curabitur mattis. In pharetra commodo odio. Aenean elementum nunc vitae ipsum. Cras leo. Aliquam quis ligula.

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# Information design: good writing

5 top strategies:

❑ Avoid the "Top Ten Editing Errors" (hand out available)

❑ Cut out "deadwood"—eliminate wordiness and redundancy

❑ Improve sentence clarity—place nouns/verbs close together; keep to a "given/new" information contract

❑ Use the active voice whenever possible and appropriate

❑ Use "jargon" only if your target audience would find its use clear and efficient; otherwise, use plain language

# Information design: executive summary

5 top strategies:

❑ Imitate the organization of your report and include your major point/recommendation
❑ Include only the main points from the report you're summarizing
❑ Keep the style coherent, not choppy or "list-like"
❑ Keep the document visually clean: use "chunking" and bullets
❑ Do not include (1) references/citations* or (2) specific details

*In formal reports, references to information sources may be listed as part of the end-matter. Always respect "in- house" or preferred practices when formatting references.

# Online resources for follow-up…

❑Student Learning Commons Writing Resources:
http://learningcommons.sfu.ca/writing/Onlineresources.php

❑Bus. 477 home page:  http://bus477-com.bryght.net/links

❑The Plain Language Association International:
http://www.plainlanguagenetwork.org/

❑The Purdue OWL—

    Conciseness and Clarity in Business Writing:
    http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/648/02/

    The Active and Passive Voice:
    http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/539/01/

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# Any questions … ?



Please feel free to use Student Learning Commons resources:  learningcommons.sfu.ca

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