
Basics of Writing a Research Report

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Abstract:

Report writing is a basic task for all the researchers, since no research can be completed until and unless it is presented in a report format. Even the best methodology would be in vain, if its report is not available to the audience. But the usefulness of a report is a major concern in report writing. The whole matter should be documented in a systematic manner which will polish it further otherwise the data left in a haphazard way will not solve the purpose. Writing a research report is a technical activity which demands whole different skills and patience from a researcher. In this chapter, an effort has been made to give a brief overview about report writing and how it can be made worth reading for audience.

Key words: report writing, research report types, preliminary section, main body, end section.

1. Introduction

The research process culminates with the writing of research report. Undoubtedly, each step of the research process is vital for any study, as negligence at any stage will affect all of the study. But this last step is the most crucial for any researcher as it is through the report that all the work done and the findings are communicated to the reader. The reader may be layman, manager or a specialist. As a matter of fact even the

best of research efforts will be of no value unless the result can be summarized and communicated well in a form that is understandable and useful. Most readers will not be aware of the amount and quality of work that has gone into the study; even though much hard work have been put into all others stage of research, all readers see is the report. Hence, report writing has a pivotal position in research. Some researchers have so many competing demands at the time of their research that till the time it is not immediately essential, simply writing doesn't get done. Such practice should be changed. A researcher should at the very beginning provide sufficient effort and time to complete the writing of the report.

Research report is a way of communicating from one to another who wants to use that information. Lancaster said "A report is a statement of collected and considered facts, so drawn up as to give clear and concise information to persons who are not already in possession of the full facts of the subject matter of the report".

The purpose of a report is to tell the interested readers the topic investigated, the methods employed to investigate, the result of the investigation, the conclusion inferred from the result and so on. In short, it provides all the details about research to the audience.

Report writing requires some unique set of skills somewhat different from those required for other stages of research. In addition to understanding of research methodology, other things required are such as written communication skills and clarity of thought, ability to express thoughts in a logical and sequential manner and knowledge base of the subject area. An important requirement is experience in research writing; more experience one acquires more effective one get in writing a research report.

2. Objective

The primary objective of the paper is to provide detailed description on basics of report writing to the beginners, in the most diluted form possible.

3. Methodology

The current paper is based on review of secondary sources in the form of book chapters, articles and books.

4. Guidelines for writing a research report

There are a series of guidelines, if properly followed will result in a good research report. Such as:

4.1. Consider the audience: While writing a report, it is important to keep the audience of report in mind. They may be general public, manager or a specialist. Their level of understanding and needs are different depending on which report should be written.

4.2. Develop an outline: Before one starts writing a report, should develop an outline of different chapters and their contents. While doing this, objective of study provides immense help to the researcher.

4.3. Don't wait too long: Most of the time, researchers keep waiting till they finish other parts of research process. Whereas this last stage of research thought of something continue throughout the research process. It should be given sufficient attention and time, otherwise all the hard work done in earlier stages may go in vain.

4.4. Fulfill the information needs: Report is a way to communicate the research related information to the audience. One should make sure that the findings of the report relate with the objective of the reader; so that readers can acquire the information they are looking for.

4.5. Consider length of the report: Depending on the requirement, length of report can vary greatly. But while deciding about it, one should keep in mind that it should be long enough to cover the subject but short enough to maintain interest. Not all the information may be presented in the report but important information should not be omitted.

4.6. Be objective: There are situations when the findings won't be acceptable to the readers. In such cases, there is a temptation to manipulate the facts so that they are appreciated by the audience. Or there is a habit among researchers to exaggerate facts to catch the attention of others. Here, a true researcher sticks to the actual research findings in an objective manner (i.e. without bias) and will define their validity if challenged by others.

4.7. Make sure report is complete: All important details such as objectives, scope of study, methodology used, limitations and the like ones should find a place in research report to make sure that report is complete.

4.8. Engaging with the literature: A good quality of report demands for regular engagement with available literature in the study area. Review and discuss the content of items reviewed, compare contribution by different writers, evaluates critically and analytically the available literature, adopt a writing structure that meet the needs of concept used and derive a conceptual framework.

4.9. Use visual devices: This is an accepted fact that a good picture is often worth more than a thousand words. Construction of visual devices, such as table, graphs, maps etc help readers to grasp the information more quickly and in a much more convenient way than through a long textual discussion. Hence, it is suggested to use visual devices, whenever required. Introducing lines for such visual devices should be given before their appearance in the text.

4.10. Use of footnotes: The footnotes serve two purposes viz., enable the writer to supplement the point or argument in report, which may not be necessary enough to be a part of the

main body of report & to provide the source of material that writer has quoted directly or indirectly. Footnote should not be used for mere purpose of scholarly appearance. They should be used sparingly; only when there is an actual requirement of footnotes.

4.11. Writing style: The style of writing a report is vital because it shows a way of presentation. Quite frequently, poor writing can ruin a quality research. Below given are few tips to help one to write a report that is easy to read.

- A report should be written in *simple, clear & friendly manner*.
- *Keep sentences short*. When sentences are too long, it requires effort by reader to understand the meaning and relationship. A simple rule can be adopted: one sentence have one idea.
- Paragraph *should not be too long or too short* and one paragraph should deal with one point only.
- Experts in the subject are not the only readers of a report, therefore *too much of technical terms should be avoided*. If necessary to use can give a little explanation for the same.
- *Discernible flow of ideas*, so that everything seems connected and makes sense for reader.
- *Check spelling and grammar* in the report. Correct use of grammar should be made & error in spelling should be strictly avoided because this will irritate the reader.
- *Use of appropriate tense*. Past tense is preferred, though, it mostly depends on the case where tense is to be used. As Day (1998) given rules for use of tense. He suggests that one should use present tense when referring to previously published work (ex. Gupta identifies education is effective for personality development) and the past tense when referring to your present results. (ex. I found that education effects personality development). Although he notes exceptions to this rule.

- Mostly *use of active voice is recommended* in a report. It is clearer, shorter & unambiguous.
- *Use of third person* is more appropriate. Although, it differs depending on the preferred style.
- *Proper punctuation*, such as fullstop (.), comma(,), colon(:) etc should be used.
- *Attractive appearance*- by providing required space.

5. Types of Report Writing/Research Report

Depending on the circumstances, research report may vary greatly in length and form. For instance, when business report is written, it is in one or two pages. In other case, a person working in a research institution might be required to submit a report to his funding agency. News items in the daily newspaper are also one form of report writing. First paragraph of news items usually contains the most important information and the succeeding paragraph contains part which is progressively less important. Book reviews, where authors analyze and report on the content of the book, author's aim, his successor failures in achieving his aim and so on. These kinds of reviews, articles are all a kind of report only. In the same way, Ph.D. theses and dissertations are also a form of report, completed by students for acquiring a degree. Hence, it is clear that investigation can be presented in a number of ways. But broadly classifying, report may be *short or long report*.

5.1 Short report: Most of the informational, interim and progress reports are of this type only. It is used when the problem is well defined, is of limited scope, requires only limited time, money and personnel and has a simple & straightforward methodology. Short reports are about five pages. At the beginning of the report, there should be some brief statement mentioning the authorization of the study, the problem to be examined and its breadth and depth. Following

this should come a summary along with the conclusions and recommendations.

5.2 Long report: Depending on its intended audience, research report may be either *technical or base report* and *management or popular report*. While both kind of research reports describe the research study, its methodology, findings, conclusions and recommendations, they differ considerably in terms of detail, writing style, use of technical terms & length. A technical report is written for researchers or specialists and a management report is written for non-technically-oriented manager or client. Some researchers try to create a single report for both kind of audience; this complicates the task and is seldom satisfactory. At times, different kinds of audience may be interested in the results of the same research study, it is always better to write both a technical and a research report.

5.2.1. Technical report or Base report: This report is prepared for the specialists who have interest in understanding the technical procedure (such as research design) and terminology used in the research project. The report is generally for other researchers or for research managers to enable them to critique methodology, check evaluations and accuracy and to follow whatever is done on a step-to-step basis. It contains full documentation and details. It has all working papers and original data and hence they are major source document. Technical jargons should be minimized as much as possible but well defined when it is used. Technical report should contain:

- Summary of the main findings in two or three pages.
- Description of the general objective of the study, problem formulation, working hypothesis, the mode of data collection and analysis.
- Methods & techniques used in the study need to be discussed in brief.

- Tools, sources, characteristics & limitations of data collected should be discussed. In case of secondary data, their suitability to the problem to be fully assessed.
- The analysis of data & presentation of the findings of the study with supporting data in the form of tables & charts should be briefly discussed in the report.
- A detailed summary of the findings observed from the earlier chapters conclusion and the recommendation drawn from the results should be explained.
- Bibliography of various sources consulted for the study should be prepared & attached in a scientific manner.
- The copy of the questionnaire & the interview schedule used for collecting the primary data, all other matters such as supporting evidence, mathematical derivation and the like ones should be included in appendix.
- Index is given at the end of the report.

5.2.2. Popular report: This report is intended for the persons who have not much interest in the technical aspects of the research methodology but are more interested in findings & conclusions of the research. The audience will include laymen to higher authorities who want summary report of research.

Compared to the technical report, the presentation will be here quite simple and lively by minimization of technical, particularly mathematical details and use of flow diagrams, charts, tables and occasional cartoon and the like ones. It contains:

- Primarily, findings of the study & their implications are mentioned.
- Suggestions are made for the actions, which can be taken by the authorities.
- Objectives of the study are mentioned along with general review of how the problem arises.
- Specific methods and techniques used in the study are described in brief, including a short review of the data on which the study is carried out.

- One section of the report contains the results of the study in very clear and non-technical words. Appropriate use of visuals such as graph, diagrams and the like ones is done.
- To supplement the report additional information on methods used etc is given in the form of appendices.

It is to be noted that above discussed is only an idea for general presentation of technical and popular report. There can be several variations in the order, form and so on in which a report can be prepared.

6. Steps in Report Writing

It is said that, *hard writing make easy reading*. The report writer must constantly work on to make his reader's task as easy as subject matter permits. Following steps are suggested to be taken while writing a report:

6.1. Prepare an outline: The researcher must be sure of what information he wants to convey and how various topics are inter-related to each other. One should prepare a detailed outline, which should cover the main points and sub-points in detail. One should indicate what is to be said in the report without thinking about how to say it. It is to be made sure that no vital idea is omitted.

6.2. Prepare a rough draft: Here, the actual task of writing begin for a researcher. He will write down a idea about the problem he studied on, sample he chosen for the study, procedure he adopted in collecting the material for his study along with various limitations faced by him and the like ones; under suitable points & sub-points decided in the earlier stage of report writing i.e. prepare an outline. One should not hesitate to get the benefit of a good guide in case of any doubt.

6.3. Revise the work: Usually this step requires more time than writing of a rough draft. One must polish their work with successive drafts until they are happy that they can do no better. After each successive draft one should put the draft away for several days until we can bring a fresh mind to bear upon it. Now, one is in a position to view it afresh and criticize their own work. Researcher should not hesitate to eliminate any irrelevant and inappropriate portion. Once researcher is sure that there is no further improvement can be made. Also, they have consulted with somebody who is well versed in research and writing, they can start writing a final draft. The final draft should be clear, simple, without unnecessary technical language, grammatical mistakes etc. Certain checklist to be review while revising a draft is mentioned in box given below:

- ✚ Is there a clear structure?
- ✚ Is there a clear storyline?
- ✚ Does your abstract reflect accurately the whole content of the report?
- ✚ Does your literature review inform the later content of the report?
- ✚ Does your introduction state clearly the research question & objective?
- ✚ Are your methods clearly explained?
- ✚ Have you made a clear distinction between findings & conclusions in the two relevant chapters?
- ✚ Does your title reflect accurately your content?
- ✚ Have you divided up your text throughout with suitable headings?
- ✚ Is there any text material that should be in the appendices or vice versa?
- ✚ Have you checked all your references & presented these in the required manner?
- ✚ Does each chapter have a preview and a summary?
- ✚ Are you happy that your writing is clear, simple & direct?
- ✚ Have you eliminated all jargon?
- ✚ Have you eliminated all unnecessary quotations?
- ✚ Have you checked spelling & grammar?
- ✚ Have you checked for assumptions about gender?
- ✚ Is your report in a format that will be acceptable to the assessing body?

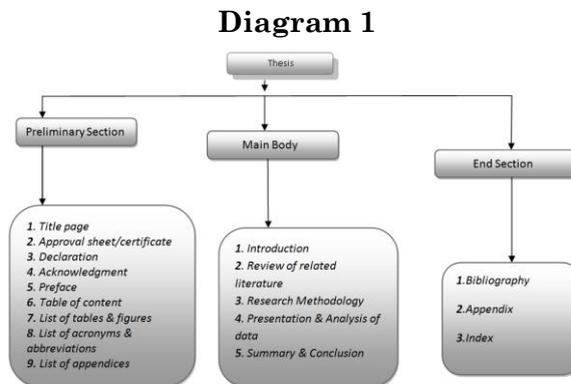
Saunders, Philips Lewis & Adrian Thornhill (2011)

6.4. Write the final draft: After completing second draft one may feel confident enough to produce it to one's colleague or friend to read.

7. Structuring a research report:

As already mentioned in Section 3, research reports can be of various forms- thesis, article, company report & the like ones. Though they all are form of report, their contents or structure differ from each other up to some extent. It is not possible to discuss all of them; structure for two substantial forms of report i.e. structure for a thesis and article has been discussed.

7.1. Structure for a thesis: At first, thesis is divided into three sections- preliminary section, main body & end section. They further consist of various sub-sections, as shown in the following diagram:



7.1.1. Preliminary Section

Few pages of preliminary section precede the main body of the report. It contains:

7.1.1.1. Title Page: It constitutes the first page of the report. Although it differs from one institution to another, they usually includes-

- Title of the thesis
- Degree for which report is presented
- Full name of the candidate (previous degree may be given)
- Name & designation of supervisor

- Seal of institution
- Name of the faculty & institution to which report is submitted
- Month & year of submission (ex. May,2008)

The title of the report is written in capital letters. If the title is extending beyond one line, it is double spaced and placed in an inverted pyramid style.

7.1.1.2. Approval sheet/certificate: Most universities require a certificate in a standard performa by the faculty supervising the thesis, regarding the genuineness of the work being candidate's original work and the same has not been submitted anywhere else.

7.1.1.3. Declaration: It is written by the researcher declaring that the work is an original piece of work, completed by her/him.

7.1.1.4. Preface: The preface (often named as forward) may give a brief account of the background, scope, purpose & general nature of research.

7.1.1.5. Table of contents: It sequentially lists the topics covered in the report along with their page number. It includes the page numbers of major contents of preliminary section, main body & end section of the report. All pages in preliminary section are numbered in roman numerals whereas main body and end section are numbered in Arabic numerals. Main purpose of this is to help readers locate their concerning topic easily.

7.1.1.6. List of tables & figures: If tables & figures are included in the thesis, their list must be given on separate pages. Corresponding numbers of the tables and figures, with their full title as they appear in the text & page numbers should be presented on this list.

Example:

SI No.	Titles/Figures	Page No.
1	Education Level	1
2	Economic status	6
3	Production pattern	10

7.1.1.7. List of acronyms & abbreviations: All the acronyms (eg. NASA) and abbreviations (eg. IBM) used in the report is numbered and list is prepared for the same.

7.1.1.8. List of appendices: If good number of appendix is used at the end of the report, list for the same may be made.

7.1.2. Main Body

This is the most important part of a thesis. It provides a complete story of research along with all the details. A research devotes the greater part of his effort in this part of thesis. It may have the subsections, such as: (a) Introduction, (b) Review of Literature, (c) Research Methodology, (d) Presentation & Analysis of Data, (e) Summary & Conclusion. This is a suggested structure, it doesn't inhibit one from adopting something else.

7.1.2.1. Introduction: This section should give reader an idea about the central problem of concern in the research and why one thought it was worth investigating. Background information is provided, which is required for understanding the problem. It should also state the objectives, significance & scope of the study in unambiguous terms. The major aim of the introduction is to stimulate the interest of the reader about context of the problem. If subdivided, introduction may have following sub-topics:

Sub topics:- - *Statement of the Problem*- description of the problem to be investigated. Sometime, may even form a separate chapter.

-*Conceptual Framework & Background of the study* should be mentioned in brief.

-*Significance & Scope of the study*, discuss importance and requirement of study in future, respectively.

-*Objectives* of the study

- *Hypothesis* of the study

-Need to *define essential terms* in the study, especially when they are differently defined by various authors.

-If research involves an organization, product or service, a preview of the same is recommended.

-Any *technical assumptions and limitations of the study* can be mentioned.

-A *brief statement* regarding the *methodology used* in the study and *statistical analysis* adopted is expected.

-An *outline* is provided by giving information on *various chapters*, its content and how the story line folds.

7.1.2.2. Review of Literature: This section mentions the available literature in the concerned area of study. Previous research studies related to the problem in hand are abstracted and vital writing in the study area reviewed. Materials can be collected from text books, periodicals, thesis, dissertation, government publication and the like ones. Very often, researchers are tempted to collect the abstracts of previous published papers and present them one after the others captioning as 'work of so and so', which is a wrong practice. Whereas, this section is neither a summary nor a chronological list of everything one have read. Rather it aims to bring together the results of the existing research, show how the studies are related, highlight the shortcomings or gaps in the previous work and bring into focus the requirement of present study. If presented well, it gives an immediate answer to purpose and significance of the problem.

7.1.2.3. Research Methodology: Till now, what and why of the research topic is all talked about. In this section, how one fulfilled the purpose is described in detail. It includes a wide framework, starting from hypothesis of the study till the final evaluation of collected data. It will clearly describe (a) the place of the study i.e. where study was conducted, (b) population used and why is it relevant for the study, (c) sample selected, its size, type and how it was selected, (d) when & what type of primary & secondary data collected, (e) instruments used and its pre-testing, (f) methods of collecting and analyzing the data used, (g) statistical tools & techniques used in the study, (h) an account of the pilot study.

Main aim of this section is to describe the procedure and develop the confidence in the quality of the same used in the study.

7.1.2.4. Presentation & Analysis of data: This is heart of the research report. Sometime several chapters are devoted for this part of the report, depending on the quantity of information one has to convey to the reader. In this section of the study raw data is subjected to specific statistical treatments and the values that are obtained are presented in the form of text, tables and graphs.

It should not just be a presentation of an endless series of tables and texts. Rather, it requires the organization of the data in a logical way, so that the work is worthwhile. Tables and graphs should be provided with relevant commentary to make them self-explanatory. This is a particularly powerful way in which one can convey the richness of data. But one has to decide about what should be a part of this section. One way to decide is to follow the research problem and hypothesis but ultimately the researcher must rely on his own judgment.

7.1.2.5. Summary & Conclusion: In the summary, main points of all previous chapters are summarized in a logical form. It is a review of the research problem, methodology used in the investigation, findings obtained after analysis of data and so on. The conclusions are stated precisely and related

directly to the hypothesis that were tested and research objectives that were introduced in the introduction chapter. In fact, answering the research question(s), meeting the research objectives and supporting or otherwise the research hypothesis is the main aim of conclusion. Very often, researchers are confused regarding the difference between finding and conclusion. A simple way to define the difference will be ,findings is ‘what one found out’ and conclusion is ‘what judgments one have formed as a result of what they have found out’. Further extensions like recommendation for further action, scope for further research, contribution of study in enriching the existing knowledge, limitation of the study can be a part of this chapter.

7.1.3. End Section:

This will be the last section of the research report. It includes: (a) Bibliography, (b) Appendix, and (c) Index

7.1.3.1. Bibliography: In this section, reference is given for the sources one has consulted in the study/text. While compiling a bibliography, the researcher may wish to sub divide the sources in different ways. Such as in primary and secondary sources, or books, journal articles, magazine and so on. There is a number of referencing system such as Harvard referencing system, American Psychological Association (APA) system, any one of them can be followed by a researcher. However, one should consult the project tutor to choose the appropriate one of them, since many universities require their own variations of the system. Whereas, one thing is common, that they all follow a logical arrangement in alphabetical order.

Additionally, a major concern to discuss here would be confusion regarding difference between reference and bibliography. References usually comes at the end of a text(say essay or research report) and should contain only those works cited/quoted within the study. Whereas, bibliography is any list of references, whether cited or not. It includes texts you made

use of, not only texts you referred in your paper, but your own additional background reading, and any other articles you think reader might need as background reading.

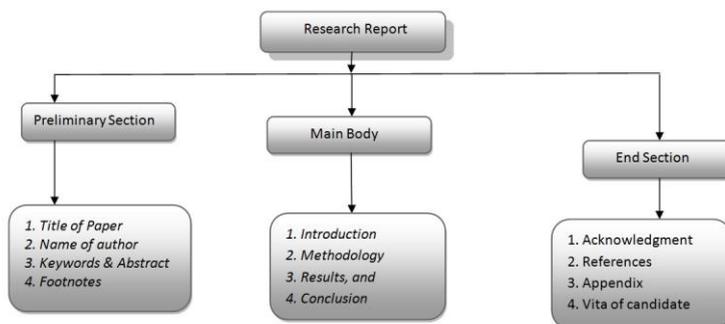
7.1.3.2. Appendix: It includes all those materials which is ‘interesting to know’ rather than ‘essential to know’. In other words, appendix consists of that material which is part of the thesis but is not necessary to be included in the main text. But it doesn’t mean all the dump left over products of the study is in the appendix. Good judgment should be used to separate the necessary from unnecessary material, the latter being a part of the thesis. However, your appendices should include a blank copy of your questionnaire, interview or observation schedule.

7.1.3.3. Index: It is an alphabetical listing of names, places topics along with the page number on which they are found. In some cases, index are used after the appendix, especially when report is published as a book, monography or bulletins.

7.2. Structure for a Research Report

A broad division of research report is same as like for a thesis, that is, preliminaries, main body, end section but the contents are different for a research report.

Diagram 2:



7.2.1. Preliminary Section: In preliminaries, sub-topics like (a) Title of paper, (b) Name of Author, (c) Keywords & Abstract, and (d) Footnote referring the qualification, position and organization of the author are given. Abstract should not be too

long in article as made in case of thesis. A length of around 1000 words is considered enough.

7.2.2. Main Body: Similar to thesis, this is the most important part of the report. It may have sub-sections like: (a) Introduction, (b) Methodology, (c) Results, and (d) Conclusion. Introduction provides an idea about the subject of the paper, its context, objectives, significance and scope of study and so on. Unlike a thesis, related academic literature is discussed in this section only. Methodology talks about sample selection, instrumentation, collection and analysis of data to obtain various kinds of summarized data and the like ones.

Results include presentation of obtained values after analysis in the form of table and charts. Conclusion is similar to those of a thesis, the major difference being the quantity of the material discussed here.

7.2.3. End Section: It consist subsets like: (a) Acknowledgment, (b) Reference, (c) Appendix, and (d) Vita of candidate. Unlike a thesis, acknowledgment is given in the end section of an article, showing gratitude to the people or organization helped in completion of study. Reference is simply to mention sources author consulted in the study.

Reference and Appendix is same as discussed in case of thesis, but the materials provided in Appendix of article should be very limited.

Vita of Candidate is a short biographical sketch of the candidate mentioning his full name, date & place of birth, qualification, experience, achievement and the like ones.

8. Some Practical Tips for writing a Research Report

Very often, researchers consider report writing as the last and one of the easiest step of research process. Till the time they realize the fact their deadline is very near and they end up submitting a 'no quality' report for their 'high quality' work. Hence, some tips were realized worth sharing, especially for those writing a report for the first time, such as:

8.1. Create time for writing: It is very important that one create time in their daily time table for writing. It may be either two or three hours or more, but it should be strictly followed to get right quantity of writing at right time.

8.2. Decide a regular writing place: Writing requires sustained concentration. It is advisable to decide one particular place for writing, where all the distractions are away and we can devote our 100%.

8.3. Fresh mind gives best writing: Undoubtedly, one can say writing is a creative process, hence it is emphasized one should write when his/her mind is at freshest.

8.4. Set goals and accomplish them: This sentence itself is self-explanatory. If someone wants to finish writing at right time some goals should be decided and made sure that they are achieved.

8.5. Never leave things in middle: When one has started writing a section, especially a complicated one, it is always advisable to finish it in once. Otherwise, one has to go all the way again for completing the same next time they start writing.

8.6. Ask others to read your work: Making mistakes while writing is quite normal for any level of writer, but most of us cannot find the mistakes we have made. Best way is to get it read by a good friend who does not hesitate to criticize your work.

9. Summary:

1. Report writing is the only way of converting all the efforts made till that stage of research process, in something which is visible to others.
2. It may sound like an easy task to write all about previous research related issues but it is a lot more troublesome. On top of that, a badly written report can easily spoil all the hard work made to reach this stage of research. This makes this last step of the research process most crucial for any researcher.

3. Writing is most creative and a continuous process, should not be waited to start till all other stages of the research process has been accomplished.
4. Research report can be of various forms and length depending on the target audience and their need. Two broad categories of report are technical (for specialist interested in technical aspect of the report) and popular report (for those interested in technical aspect of the report).
5. Even though, reports are of various forms but all reports must be written in simple & clear words, keeping audiences in mind. Researcher should be aware of certain pitfalls which are very common such as grammatical & spelling mistakes, use of technical words, long sentences and the like ones.

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