

# **REPORT WRITING FOR PROFESSIONAL PEOPLE**

**A Short Course in Report Writing for Vanuatu Public Servants**



**Prepared for  
VANUATU INSTITUTE OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION & MANAGEMENT  
(VIPAM)**

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

Report writing is an essential skill for all professionals. A report has one purpose – to inform as clearly and simply as possible.

In the Vanuatu Public Service, most Job Descriptions include reporting as a task - from a Department's Driver preparing a report on vehicle and fuel use; a Cleaner reporting on the need to order mops and soap to the more technical reports written by Civil Engineers or expenditure analysts.

The purpose of the Training Session today is to make you aware of why you should be able to write reports, what type of reports there are and then some practical exercises in writing simple reports.

*This Training Module was developed specifically for the Public Servants but if you are working for a donor funded project, you should be able to locate reports used commonly in your work area and practice with those.*

In the Public Service we commonly prepare several types of reports that might be available for public information, for internal departmental use and confidential reports.

## 1.2 Learning Outcomes

On completion of this training you will understand

- Types of reports fitted to purpose and audience (who will read the report?)
- Report Structures
  - Table of Contents
  - Abbreviations Table
  - Executive Summary
  - Introduction,
  - Main Body
  - Conclusion
  - Recommendations
  - Annexes/Appendices
- What to write in each section
- Numbering
- Creating templates
- Language Used in Report
- Practical Exercises ie Incident Report
- Consultative Report Writing
- Consultation/Stakeholder Meeting Prior to public release of Report
- Report Writing Check List

## **2. TYPES OF REPORTS**

### **2.1 Public Reports**

Across the whole of Government there are several really important reports that every Ministry contributes to such as:

- Annual Report (for activities of the previous year)
- Annual Development Report (ADR) Activities of donor funded projects

You can ask in your Ministry to see copies of these *publicly available documents*

### **2.2 Internal Reports**

Internal Reports are the main reports we as Public Servants commonly create such as Weekly Reports, Monthly Reports. Some Departments supply *templates* for regular reports in the form of “check-list” templates.

What is a template? A template is a set, prescribed format in which you just add the special individual details of your particular report.

The Public Service Staff Manual gives you *TEMPLATES* for writing reports such as:

- Selection/Recruitment Outcome Report 3.5
- Performance Management Review PMR 5.2
- Discipline Report 6.1
- Unauthorised Use of GoV Vehicle 9.2

### **DISCUSSION:**

*An example of a Check List Template of the Public Works Department (PWD) Daily Machinery Use template can be seen as Appendix 1. This is meant to be filled in for each day a piece of heavy equipment is used. What’s good and bad about this Report Template?*

*Positive:* It’s just a matter of filling in the blanks

*Negative:* A template does not easily allow different details to be included.

***IF YOU FIND YOU ARE FREQUENTLY CREATING THE SAME TYPE OF REPORT AND YOU DO NOT HAVE A TEMPLATE PROVIDED IN THE PSC STAFF MANUAL – CREATE YOUR OWN!***

(Refer Appendix 2 for simple instructions on creating a template)



***Reminder! When creating a template you do not write/design the document and then try to save as a Template. You save a blank page as a template and then on the blank page, you create or format the page in the required template format.***

## 2.3 Confidential Reports

There are many reports that are confidential and are written only for small groups of people often very senior in the Public Service. Sometimes these are Commercial in Confidence – that is they contain information about financial contracts. If you accidentally see one of these on a desk, you should not read it and most certainly must not inform anyone of its contents. You can be prosecuted if you do so!

These include reports such as

- Central Tender Board documents (RFQ or Request for Quotation)
- Ombudsman's Reports
- Distinguished Committee of Officials (DCO) Discussion Papers
- Council of Ministers (COM) Papers



If you are asked to help to write a confidential report, ask if you can see a blank template or style guide in the sections or layout of the report as each report is a little different but generally follows similar principles as follows.



### DISCUSSION TIME

**Let's put up on the Whiteboard the kind of Reports this group is asked to prepare or contribute to.**

## A Formal Report

*Before you start to write a report just start by thinking carefully WHY you are writing it in the first place. What is the report's purpose? Think before you start!*

### Nine Great Report Writing Tips

1. What is the purpose of the report? What is it trying to do?
2. Who is going to read it? Make sure your writing style is appropriate
3. Do your research, write and then summarise.
4. Too long and the reader will be bored. Cover your topic, provide the information. Stop!
5. Lead the reader along the path to your recommendations.
6. Appearances matter – make the font and report visually appealing
7. Review and Revise
8. Any extra technical detail – add as Appendices that the reader can read if they wish to
9. Recommendations often come right at the end of a Report but what if the reader is too busy and does not read right to the finish? *One clever tactic is to do your Executive Summary or Introduction and then your Recommendations in numbered, prioritised order.*

## A Formal Report typically

- presents information, not an argument
- is meant to be scanned quickly by the reader
- uses numbered headings and sub-headings
- uses short, concise paragraphs and dot-points where applicable
- uses graphics wherever possible (tables, graphs, illustrations)
- starts with an Executive Summary (sometimes titled Executive Summary)
- is often followed by Recommendations (sometimes put straight after the Executive Summary)
- is often finished with Appendices (additional information referred to by number throughout the Report ie Refer to Appendix 1)
- does not always need references and bibliography

Before we look at each of these sections and how/why you do them, let's also discuss the following "Do's and Don'ts":

**Do** make the Report look great! Presentation and style are important. First impressions count, so consider these simple tips:

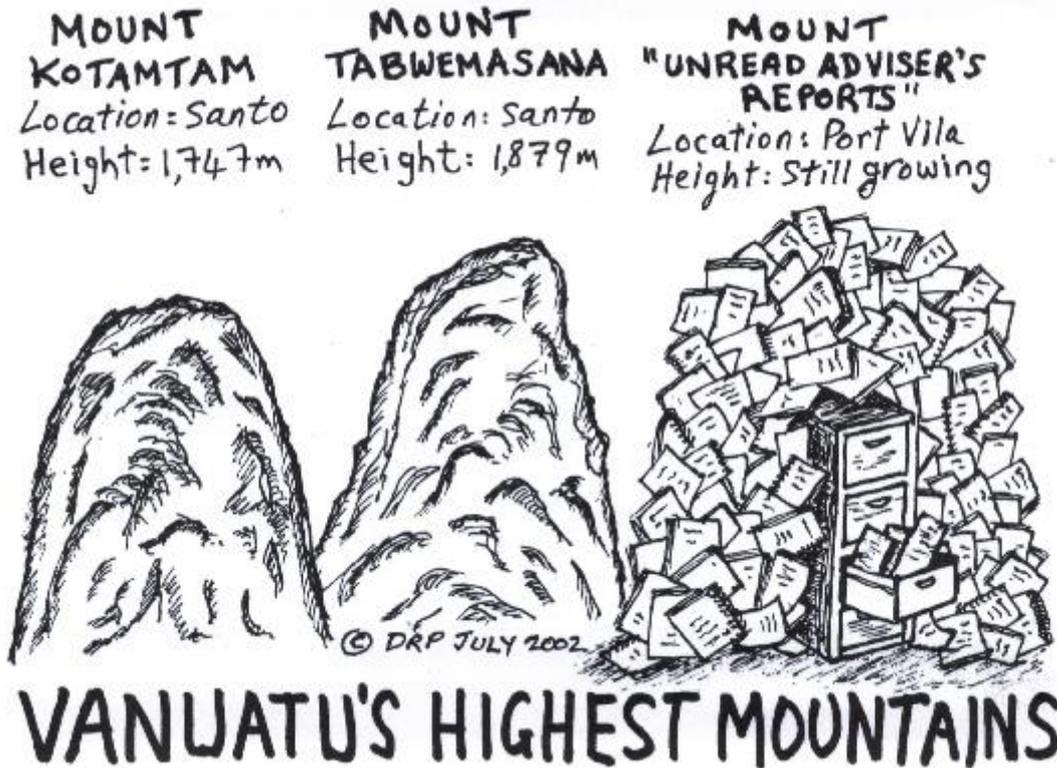
- use plenty of white space
- ensure the separate parts of your report stand out clearly
- use subheadings
- allow generous spacing between the elements of your report
- use dot points/ numbers/ letters to articulate these elements
- use tables and figures (graphs, illustrations, maps etc) for clarification.
- number each page
- use consistent and appropriate formatting



**Don't Do!** Avoid these:

- the inclusion of careless, inaccurate, or conflicting data
- the inclusion of outdated or irrelevant data
- facts and opinions that are not separated
- unsupported conclusions and recommendations
- careless presentation and proof-reading
- too much emphasis on appearance and not enough on content
- Too much technical jargon
- Too many abbreviations – if you use them, explain each in full the first time it is used and include in an Abbreviation Table at the beginning of the report.

# DISCUSSION TIME



CARTOON PRINTED WITH THE KIND PERMISSION OF DOUGLAS R. PATTERSON (KRANKI KONA)

**WHY DO YOU THINK SO MANY OF THESE REPORTS ARE NEVER READ AND JUST SIT ON THE SHELVES OF A DEPARTMENT'S LIBRARY, GATHERING DUST?**

# CONSULTATION

Vanuatu is a country that is well known as a society based consultation and collaborative decision making. In a village, the Chief consults with the villagers when there is a project being undertaken such as clearing a large communal garden to plant crops for a big feast in a year's time or building an aid post or re-roofing a class-room in the village school.



## THINK TANK TIME - DISCUSSION

Why does the Chief consult with the villagers?

.....

.....

.....

How can you use this Vanuatu idea of consultation to ensure your Report has a solid base of acceptance – particularly the Report's recommendations?

.....

.....

.....

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.....

.....

After your Report has been written, submitted to your Supervisor, reviewed and redrafted depending on comments received, what is the next step – official letter of endorsement and official presentation OR?

.....

.....

# REPORT STRUCTURE

A Formal Report should generally include the following sections. Sections marked with an asterisk (\*) are essential. Others are optional depending on the type, length and purpose of the report. Using this structure will help to give your report the correct level of formality; it will also help to ensure that you do not leave out anything important.

- Letter of presentation to accompany the Report
- Title page
- Table of contents\* (depends how long and/or technical)
- List of abbreviations
- Executive Summary
- Introduction
- Body
- Conclusion
- Recommendations
- Appendices. \*
- Numbering: All of the above sections & Appendices should be numbered
- Footnote with Page Number so readers may clearly reference sections in discussions



## LETTER ACCOMPANYING/PRESENTING THE REPORT

This is a letter to the person who commissioned the report, in which you effectively hand over your work to that person.

- Salutation (eg. Dear Director,)
- Purpose of the letter (eg. This is the final draft of the report on 'OH&S in PWD' which was requested by you to assess the Corporate Plan's KPI of prioritised raft of PWD's policy & procedure guidelines )
- Main findings of the report (recommendations in very short summarised format)
- Any important considerations
- Any acknowledgement of any significant help
- Conclusion (eg. Please do not hesitate to arrange a meeting as an opportunity to discuss this Report and its recommendations)

## FRONT COVER

This should contain:

- the report's title which clearly states the purpose of the report
- full details of for whom the report was prepared
- full details of the person(s) who prepared the report (perhaps as a footnote or in small print at base of the cover)
- the date of the preparation of the report



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

This is usually done only if the report is longer than, say, thirty pages.

- This is a list of the headings and appendices of the report.
- Depending on the complexity and length of the report, you could list tables, figures and appendices separately.
- Make sure the correct page numbers are shown opposite the contents.
- Up-to-date word processing packages can generate a table of contents for you.

## ABBREVIATIONS TABLE

If necessary, you should provide an alphabetical list of the abbreviations you have used in the report, especially if they may not be familiar to all readers of the report with explanations of their meanings.

Technical terms can be explained in a Glossary



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS (IF APPROPRIATE)

This is a short paragraph thanking any person or organisation which gave you help in collecting data or preparing the report.

## SUMMARY OR EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

An Executive Summary is quite different from an introduction. It is a summary of the report, in which you include one sentence (or so) for every main section of your report. For example, you can include:

- the context of the report (in Vanuatu, for PWD)
- the purpose of the report
- the major recommendations
- the conclusions

*GOOD TIP ✓*

*Write the Executive Summary **after** you have written the report. You'll find it's much easier to do it last.*

## DISCUSSION & OPINION TIME

Can you remember the best report you ever read?



Why do YOU think it was it a “good” report?

✍️ .....

## **INTRODUCTION OR BACKGROUND**

- Give enough background information to provide a context for the report.
- State the purpose of the report.
- Clarify key terms and indicate the scope of the report (i.e. what the report will cover).

## **BODY**

The content of the body depends on the purpose of the report, and whether it is a report of primary or secondary research. This is the main part of the Report and should be the longest, packed with information, charts, tables, photos (if useful).

By the time this part is finished you need to imagine that a reader who knew nothing about the situation, now has enough information to decide what should be done next!

## **CONCLUSION**

Sum up the main points of the report. The conclusion should clearly relate to the objectives of your report. No surprises please! Don't include new information here.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

These are suggestions for future action. They must be sensibly drawn from the evidence and facts in the body of your report.

It's often very smart to put them at the beginning of the Report so the reader can access them straight away. If interested, they can then read the rest of the Report but if they are right up at the beginning, you have communicated what you think needs to be done!

## **APPENDICES**

An appendix contains material which is too detailed, technical, or complex to include in the body of the report (for example, specifications, a questionnaire, or a long complex table of figures), but which is referred to in the report. Appendices are put at the very end of the report, after everything else. Each appendix should contain different material. Number each appendix clearly.

# **ACTIVITY TIME - LET'S PRACTICE!**

## **INCIDENT REPORT**

Turn to Appendix 3 for an Incident Report  
Depending on the scenario chosen by your trainer, write a Report on what happened.



## REPORT WRITING LANGUAGE

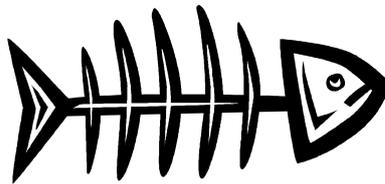
One of the biggest mistakes writers make is the use of the wrong sort of language in their reports. By the word “language” does not mean French or English or Bislama but rather the type of words you use. Do not use words that are too fancy or that are too technical or expressions that the “man on the street” cannot read.

Remember the **KISS** principle!

Keep  
It  
Short  
Simple

If you keep it as simple as possible, your message will be clear to a wide audience of readers. Of course some reports are very technical and have to be this way such as the “Standard Specifications for Road and Bridge Works” or “Petroleum Spill Management.”

However there are lots of Reports that are written in complicated English when the words could be much simpler. Some people call this style “EngFISH” – English that stinks like dead fish.



The really big word to describe this overly complicated type of writing is “*legalese*.”

Here is an example:

*“For the purposes of calculating your maximum benefits under the Public Service Commissions mandated regulations (which supercede the current regulations in force) it could be that it would be advantageous as it appears that you may be affected hereby, to elect that the regime will apply to you. Persons who do not make such formal elections remain under the purview of the previous regime of benefits which remain applicable to them.”*

What does this mean?

*“So we can calculate your salary, please apply for the increase as per PSC regulations. If you do not, you will not receive the increase.”*

### Top Tip

Look at what you have written and try to revise the Report to make the sentences short, the words simple and the meaning clear. Who are you writing it for? Make *them* your target.



## USING THE RIGHT WORDS

Anyone who is a French speaker knows that in formal French writing there is very definitely a right way and a wrong way to say anything – especially when writing letters that make a request or report to a manager or important person. French schools spend years teaching informal and formal correspondence and reporting but in English, this is not done.

It can really cause you huge problems if you write in a way that is seen as rude and demanding!



### Negative Words

- No
- Can't Cannot
- Impossible
- Failure
- Quite

### Positive Words

- Please
- Thank you
- Well done
- Congratulations
- Thank you for your support/ efforts/ hard work
- I value your input
- Very
- Most

### Relationship- building phrases

- It would greatly assist me/us if you could
- I know that it's a busy time and you are working hard, but may/might I just ask....  
(Note: "might" is even more powerful in requesting assistance)
- How is that work going? May I provide help in any way?
- Any phrases that imply me and you or us and them

*Positive words and phrases motivate people to help you!*



**APPENDIX 1**

**GOVERNMENT of VANUATU**

**VEHICLE/PLANT/EQUIPMENT INSPECTION REPORT**

Date: ..... Reg/ No: ..... ODO/HR Meter: .....

Type: ..... Make:..... Fuel Type: .....

Engine: ..... Type:..... Make:.....

<b>CHECK:</b>	<b>COMMENTS</b>
1 Engine	
2. Transmission	
3. Drive Shaft	
4. Steering	
5. Brakes	
6. Suspension	
7. Wheels & Tyres	
8. Tracks	
9. Hydraulics	
10. Body Work	
11. Front Axle	
12. Rear Axle	
13. Fuel System	
14. Brake Lines	
15. Trailer Connections	
16. Attachments	
17. Electrical System	
18. Cooling System	
19. Drive Belts	
20. Controls	
21. Tracks	

Any Other Comments: .....

Work Required: .....

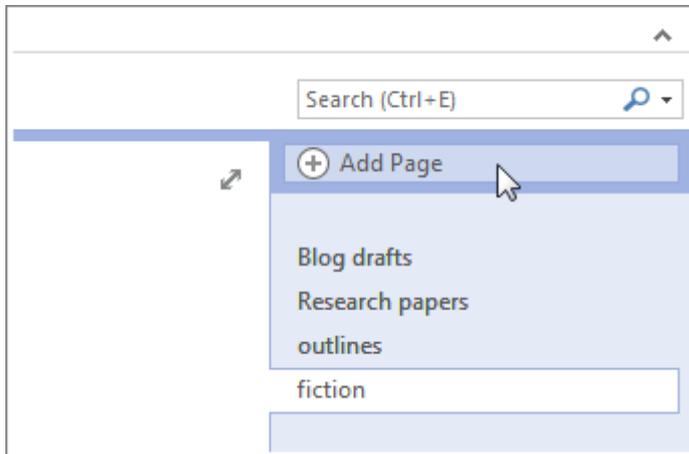
Inspected By: ..... Signed:.....

Approved By: O.I.C. Mechanical ..... Signed: .....

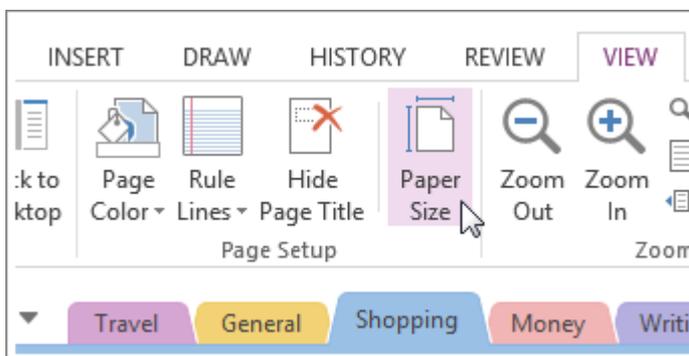
## APPENDIX 2 HOW TO CREATE A TEMPLATE

A template is a pre-designed layout that you can apply to a new page to provide a level of consistency and save time.

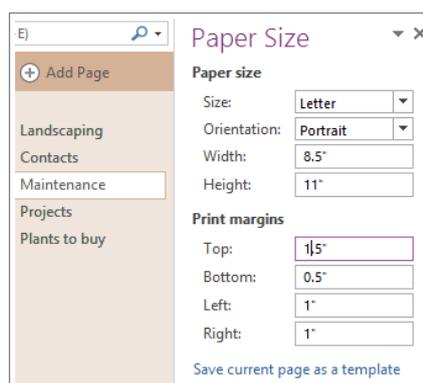
1. Click **Add Page** to create a new, blank page.



2. Click **View > Paper Size**.



3. In the **Paper Size** task pane, set the paper size and print margins.
4. Add any content that you want to appear in the template. Every new page that you create using this template will have this information on it.
5. When you're done, click **Save current page as a template** at the bottom of the **Paper Size** task pane.



6. In the **Save As Template** dialog box, give the template a name and click **Save**.
7. NOW ..... on that blank page you create the document that will become a template.

**REMEMBER! DO NOT CREATE THE DOCUMENT FORMAT THEN TRY TO SAVE AS A TEMPLATE**



### **MORE TOP TIPS**

What documents do you type – again and again and again that could be created as templates so you just change names dates and minor details?

A bit of work up-front and you will save yourself a lot of time over the working year!

Go “on-line.” There are literally hundreds of templates already created that you might like to look at to adapt or use.

The Public Service Staff Manual has many templates as well. Have a look at them for format ideas



## APPENDIX 4: CHECK LIST FOR REPORT WRITING

- Did I need to write this? Is it necessary?
- Is my communication on time?
- Does it contain all the facts?
- Are the facts correct?
- Is my main message clear, concise and direct?
- Is my message logically organized and easy to read?
- Did I use terms and language my readers will understand?
- Did I use my big words where short, simple ones could do the job better?
- Did I state my points positively?
- Did I put related topics and ideas together?
- Is my writing natural?
- Did I use ten (10) words when four (4) would do the job better?
- Did I use correct spelling and grammar?
- Did I explain anything I didn't need to?
- Did I use 'slang' and 'dialect' unless I needed them for clarity?
- Can the reader/s easily understand my message?
- Does the layout help easy reading and referencing?
- Is my tone friendly and courteous?
- Does it look great – good font, open and easy to read, lots of “white space”?

