



Veni Apwann

Come and learn...come and teach

Quick Start Guide to Writing Effective Reports

Civil society organisations (CSOs) produce a range of reports. Among the most common are reports to donors and reports to the Board, including programme and project reports, the Executive Director's report and financial reports. Your organisation may also produce conference, workshop or meeting reports.

While each of these reports is different, some common guidelines apply to all of them.

1. Write with the readers in mind. Think about what they want to know and in how much detail.

2. Write in a way that reflects your organisation's personality. A report is an opportunity to influence the reader's perception of what you do and how you do it.

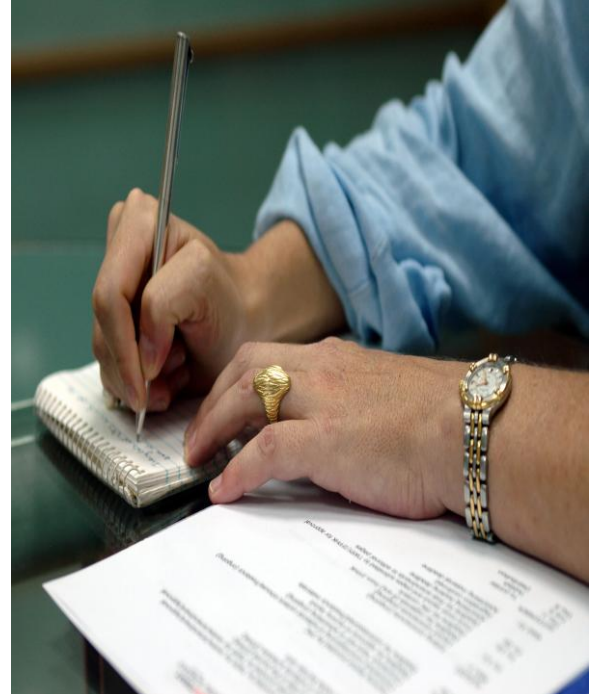
3. Keep the report as succinct as possible. Few people have time to read a long report. Donors are much more impressed by a short, relevant report than a long, rambling one. If the report is longer than a few pages, make sure you include an Executive Summary.

4. Focus on documenting your results. Many reports just contain a long list of completed activities. But what the reader most wants to know, and particularly your donor, is what impact you have had and on whom. Make sure you include not just quantitative results (e.g. how many people your programme has reached) but also qualitative ones (e.g. how your programme has changed the knowledge, attitudes and behaviours of your target group).

5. Appeal to the heart as well as the head. Don't hesitate to include photos of and quotes from people who took part in your activities. These are what the reader will remember long after they have forgotten some of the technical details. Send short video clips that capture the atmosphere of what took place.

6. Document the things that didn't go as planned and the lessons learnt. Many CSOs shy away from documenting what they see as their 'failures', particularly when reporting to a donor. But these are just as important as your 'successes' because they are opportunities for learning and adapting. Sharing your experiences and explaining how you intend to do things differently in future demonstrates that you are a learning organisation - and you may save others from making similar mistakes.

7. Write in 'plain English.' Probably the commonest trap that CSOs fall into when they write reports is to produce heavy, formal, wordy documents that sound as if the writer has swallowed a dictionary or a legal textbook! If you don't say things like 'aforementioned' and 'heretofore' when you speak, don't write them either. Don't say 'endeavour' if you would normally say 'try'. Don't include words if you are not one hundred percent sure of their meaning as that will make you sound foolish rather than impressive. As you write, think how you would speak to the reader and use that as your guide.





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Helpful Tips

Here are some tips for writing clear and succinct reports (that you can also apply to any other writing).

a) Plan before you write. Before you set pen to paper (or fingers to keyboard):

- make sure you are clear on the purpose of the report and your target audience;
 - do any background reading or research that is needed;
 - jot down in bullet form the key points that you want to include;
 - decide on the outline and structure of the report.

b) Keep paragraphs short with just one main message, stated early in the paragraph.

c) Use short sentences because:

- they are easier to read and remember, so have more impact;
- they make your message more obvious as an idea can get lost in a long sentence;
- making a long sentence easy to read requires confidence in how to punctuate.

d) Write in the active rather than the passive voice whenever possible, for example, 'We trained 15 representatives of Santa Anna Village Council in proposal writing' not '15 people from Santa Anna Village Council were trained in proposal writing'. The active voice is easier to read and tells you who is carrying out the action.

e) Cut out unnecessary words. As you review what you have written, consider whether something could be said more simply or succinctly. See the box below for some examples.

Box 1: Examples of cutting out unnecessary words

Example 1

Can we meet on Wednesday for the purpose of reviewing the budget?

Can we meet on Wednesday to review the budget?

Example 2

During the course of my visit, I met several outstanding community leaders.

During my visit, I met several outstanding community leaders.

Example 3

The AGM will be held in the very near future.

The AGM will be held soon.

Example 4

Despite the fact that the project started late, the results were outstanding.

Although the project started late, the results were outstanding.