CONSTRUCTING A REPORT

GUIDANCE NOTES FOR LORD ROOTES MEMORIAL FUND AWARD HOLDERS

A. INTRODUCTION

All holders of a Lord Rootes Memorial Fund (LRMF) award are required to submit a report after completion of their project. The following notes are intended to provide a guide to award holders and outline some of the expectations of the LRMF Trustees with regard to structure and content of the report. Perhaps the most important point to keep in mind when writing the report is that it is intended to communicate the holder's experience to the reader of the report and as such requires careful planning, structure, succinctness and clarity . The most important person when considering the design of your report is the intended target(s) and it is their convenience, not the author's, that should take precedence.

The LRMF report serves two main purposes:

(i) It is a record of the project having taken place and thus triggers payment of the remainder of the award to the holder; and

(ii) It is placed in the public domain in the Modem Records Centre of the University Library to form a source of information for future students and researchers.

It is precisely because these reports enter the public domain and collectively reflect on the calibre of students studying at Warwick that it is critical they achieve a basic standard of academic presentation. These guidelines are intended to assist in the achievement of that standard. While the Trustees are not expecting a rigorous academic report - the time scale for the project and the writing does not lend itself to that - they are expecting a reasonable attempt at producing a work of "publishable" standard.

Of course, it is recognised that the reports the Trustees receive are from a very wide range of project types and recording methods (e.g. photographic records, diaries, drama productions, studies via questionnaires, studies via observation, etc,) and so it is clearly impossible to be totally prescriptive about what should and should not be included. However, there are certain elements that should always be present in the construction of a report. Thus, even if the primary objective of the project was the creation of, say, a film, a copy of that film should only form one part of the submission to the LRMF Trustees, the other key element being a written report.

B. THE CONSTRUCTION OF A REPORT

Pick up any textbook, any academic article or even a novel or a play, and you probably recognise a common structure and a typical report has the same three main components (although they may differ in content and importance):

- Prefatory parts
- Body of the work
- Appended parts

Each of these components is constructed from a number of elements which, again, have similarities across the spectrum of writings and which are discussed below.

B.1 The Prefatory Parts

The three essential components here are a *title page,* a *table of contents and illustrations,* and a *synopsis.* Sometimes, as a courtesy to the many people who usually help in a project, a fourth element - an "Acknowledgements" page - is added where credit is given to those without whose help the project would not have been completed. Such acknowledgement is always at the discretion of the author but in research and other funded reports it is considered very remiss not to acknowledge the sources of your funding (other than self of course).

B.1.1 The Title Page

This provides the obvious information of title and author but, in the case of a report it should also contain details of the intended recipient and the date of completion or submission.

- ***The title***

Even something as "simple" as the title should communicate and it should indicate at a glance what is contained in the report. You may wish to consider using Kipling's (1989, Papermac edition), "six honest serving-men" - who, what, where, when, why and how - when constructing your title. Needless to say many titles do not require all of them but by way of examples consider;
A director's (who) diaristic report (how) on the staging of Rascal's Retreat (what) at the 1996 (when) Edinburgh Festival (where); or A photographic record (how) of pipe organs (what) in Israel (where), 1997(when).

- ***The author***

This is self-evident and it can be assumed that an author knows their own name. However, there may be additional information required. A contact, e-mail or web address (at the time of writing) should be included. The completeness of this information is up to the author and depends on whether the author expects or wishes for readers who are interested in the topic to try to make contact. Academics always include complete information including e-mail details but for an LRMF award holder simply putting something like: 3rd year Politics student, University of Warwick would be sufficient. Of course, there may be more than one author and details of each author should then be provided.

- ***The recipient***

This indicates who the report was prepared for and why, if it forms only a part of a larger commitment (e.g. a dissertation for a degree or a report for the LRMF award). This would read something like: Prepared for the Lord Rootes Memorial Fund Trustees in partial fulfillment of the conditions of receipt of an LRMF Award.
[Note: Whether the author(s) or the recipient(s) is (are) placed first does not matter.]

- ***The date***

This is the date you completed and submitted the report and is normally placed near the bottom of the title page. The date should be in full and cover at least the month and year (i.e. August not Aug. and 1996 not ‘96) although the format is up to the author.

B.1.2 Table of contents and table of illustrations

These two components may be placed together on a single page, if both are short, but more normally are on separate pages. The need for such pages implies that sections and diagrams are given both titles and section or diagram numbers (whether you use the word “diagram”, “figure”, “exhibit”, etc, is not important). Another critical implication is that pages are given page numbers.

B.1.3 The Synopsis

The primary purpose of a synopsis is to provide a very quick and accurate overview of what is contained in the report. The synopsis has a variety of names - summary, abstract, executive summary, précis, synopsis, epitome, etc. - but such variation is merely semantics. They all mean the same thing. The two rules are that: (i) it should NEVER be more than a single page of a single spaced, clearly readable font, and (ii) it should provide an accurate synopsis of what the report is about. If appropriate, it should cover four key elements: the primary objective of the report; how the task was tackled or the approach used to achieve the objectives; key items of information or findings contained in the report; and the primary conclusions and recommendations derived from the work. Finally, for consistency and coherence, the sequence of any points presented in the synopsis should follow the sequence within the report proper.

B.2 Body of the Work

Clearly there is no one, definitive way of constructing the main body of a report since it is dependent on the purpose of the report, the context in which the report is set, the actual material and data collected and analysed within the report, and the intent and preferred style of the author. There are however, two very common, generic (some might say traditional) approaches - the inductive and the deductive - which, if well understood, can be modified and adapted to suit almost any subject matter.

The first method, the logical or **inductive** approach, is perhaps the most common. It is particularly common in scientific reports (even in today's post-modernist world). However, it is so common that its form can also be recognised in such "unscientific" works as plays and novels. The basic sequence is: "set the scene" (ie some sort of introduction); "build the suspense" (ie introduce the necessary information, data or evidence); and "whodunnit" (ie what can be concluded from the data and analysis). In a more formal report this would be built around a basic framework that looked something like Table I.

Table 1: Basic Structure of A Logical, Inductive Report
(adapted from: Lesikar, 1977, p100-105)

Introduction, typically covering:

- Origin of report, why it exists, the intended audience, and who compiled/wrote it;
- Purpose/objective of project and report;
- Scope/boundaries of the project and the report;
- Sources of information and methods for collecting and analysing the data.
- Limitations and constraints both on the execution of project and on the report
- Historical background to the problem under investigation, if appropriate
- Definitions that the reader needs to understand
- Structure of the report, explanation of its logic or argument development

Body of the report:

- Conclusions of the report, typically covering
- Summary;
- Conclusions that can be deduced or inferences that can be drawn from the data
- and its analysis;
- Recommendations;
- What have I contributed to the world and what have I learnt.

The second common style of a report construction is termed the psychological or **deductive** approach. Many of the elements of this approach are similar, if not the same, as those in the inductive approach. What differs is the sequencing. This style starts with the surprise, with the answer, with the conclusions or recommendations and then proceeds to prove the point. Again it has parallels in the novel and the play. The film that starts in 1996 but then, through flashbacks or retrospectives, takes you back to what is perceived as the "beginning" and fills in the sequence of events that led to the current situation is using just such an approach.

Because of its frequency of use these guidelines are focused on the logical/inductive approach, which will be discussed using the sequence presented in Table 1, but note that the LRMF Trustees do not insist on this approach.

B.2.1 A "Typical" Inductive Report Format

<u>Introduction</u>

The primary purpose of the introduction is to orient the reader to the problem or topic to be discussed in the report. Its content again varies depending on the report but authors should at least consider including the following. [Note that they do not need to be considered in the order given nor do they have to be separate, sub-headed sections.]

<u>Origins of the report</u>

In a business report this is termed "authorisation" since it specifies who requested the report and why. In the LRMF context it should be a brief statement of why the author(s) chose the project and what made it of such great interest that they went out of their way to apply for funding, to execute the project and to write a report on their efforts.

<u>Purpose or objective</u>

This is a critical element. It specifies the expected outcomes of both the project and the report. Again it has a plethora of names - objective, problem, object, purpose, goal, mission, assignment, proposal, etc - and, of course, the project may have several objectives of varying importance.

<u>Scope</u>

It is essential that the author specify the boundaries of what is being covered in the report. It is also important to note that the boundaries of the report and of the project may be different. i.e. the report may focus on only one aspect of the total project.

[Note: Without both objectives and scope being defined, a project, and its report, is unlikely to remain focused on the issues it purports to be presenting.]

Limitations

All projects suffer from a lack of resources to complete the task the researcher or author would really like to do. All projects suffer from a lack of complete, clear-cut information. However, these constraints vary from project to project. It is therefore a good idea to outline any major limitations or constraints that the reader should bear in mind when reviewing the report.

History of the subject matter (if appropriate)

In order to fully understand the topic of the report it is sometimes necessary to give an overview of the facts leading up to the award holder's interest and involvement. Many of the applicants for an LRMF Award have a burning desire to complete a particular project (hiking in the Andes, comparing welfare and education of infants in Cuba and the UK, etc) others wish to look at particular problems (the plight of native Americans, for example). For the most part, the initial readers of the LRMF reports (ie the Trustees) will have little background knowledge of the subject, geographic area, or the historical context of the project. It is often a good idea to invite the reader to enter the report by placing the work in context. This may involve a brief discussion of the region (if there is a geographic aspect to the project), of some key and relevant issues (e.g. political environment) and of any relevant principles raised (eg civil rights).

Definitions and glossary (if deemed necessary)

If there are a few words or concepts that need defining in order for the reader to understand the work, then it is appropriate to include them in the introductory section. If the list is extensive because of the unusual nature of the subject matter (or simply if the author feels it is necessary) then such definitions and glossaries are better included in the "Appended Parts" .

Structure of the report

In lengthy reports it is often difficult to develop and hold an absolutely clear line of thought or argument. For the reader this means the possibility of losing the thread of what the author is saying. Therefore, it is always a good idea to provide the reader with a "map" which outlines the key areas covered in each section and the main linkages or pathways between them. Tell the reader the order of the topics and, perhaps more importantly, why that order has been adopted.

B.2.2 The Body of the Report

This is the area about which guidance notes can be the least helpful since it is wholly dependent on the subject matter, the type of data or information, the form of data collection, etc. Clearly it is here that the author presents their information, analysis and findings. If this is a standard "scientific" project a typical sequence can be found in almost any scientific journal on the subject matter in question. If it is more "arts" or "social science" oriented (eg a drama, a film, a photographic record, a diary, etc) it is to exemplars within those fields that the author should turn for guidance on presentation. Perhaps one of your initial referees might be willing to provide direction on where to look for the more accepted and acceptable forms of presentation here.

That said, there are some common errors that a guide like this might highlight and, in so doing, help to alleviate.

Inductive or not inductive? That is the question

It is in the body where the “evidence” is presented. It also forms about 70-80% by volume of the report. It is here that the need for structure is at its most critical. Written communication, by convention and necessity is unidimensional and unidirectional - you start at the beginning/front/top and work to the end/back/bottom and (especially when writing reports) there is rarely any feedback on its acceptability or usefulness. The problem facing the writer is the condensation of a multidimensional, rather diffuse subject into a unidimensional, coherent framework. This is achieved by using two key tools:

(i) Presentation sequence: There are numerous methods to sequence information - logical/inferential, psychological/deductive, chronological, thematic, random, etc. The decision on which to use depends on the subject and data collection method. For example, a tour of North America by Greyhound bus has a naturally imposed structure based on the route taken. Thus, one possibility is a diaristic format in a chronological or route based sequence. However, if the purpose of the trip was a comparison of attitude of the American Citizen of the East Coast, Mid West, and West Coast towards British students touring their country and asking silly questions, these “natural” time based sequences may no longer be appropriate. The one sequence that should almost always be avoided is the random approach.

(ii) “Sign-posting”: Quite simply this means considering your reader. As author you know why you place things in the order you do, you know what line of thought you are taking, you know why you break your writing up as you do. However, unless you make these things explicit, each time the reader comes to a new section of a report, particularly a long one, be/she is likely to be saying “where are you taking me now?”. The solution is simple: top and tail each major section with brief introductory and concluding paragraphs that do not simply summarise what you are doing but also say why.

Presentation style

Some people are more comfortable writing in essay style (ie not using headings and subheadings) than in a more formal report style. That is a personal preference and the former may well suit the material better. However, it does not negate the need for a structure (even novels have chapter titles and follow the basic rules of grammar and syntax). If a report structure is adopted then that implies the use of headings and consistency in style of heading (as in this guide) is then critical since it indicates the relationship between elements of the argument presented.

B.2.3 On being human

Since many of the LRMF award holders will not be skilled researchers, it is important that some of the commonest frailties be recognised and addressed.

Exaggeration

We have all heard of the fisherman's tale about the size of the one that got away. The desire to make something more spectacular than it is in real life must be avoided.

There must be one right answer

In life there is not one single solution to many problems but a selection from amongst a number of options. The belief that the work must lead to an absolute and definitive and irrefutable conclusion should be discarded. This simply means recognising that there are usually several interpretations that can be placed on information but does not mean that some sort of conclusion cannot be reached and supported through the work presented.

Lack of evidence is not proof to the contrary

Lack of evidence to support one hypothesis or proposition cannot be taken as evidence to support a contrary proposition. All conclusions must be based on and supported by the evidence collected.

We are all biased and bigoted

We all like to think of ourselves as liberal and right thinking people but the truth is we all have preferences and biases. What we must try to do is recognise those biases and make inferences and deductions about how they might affect our interpretation of data.

Comparing apples and oranges

Keeping the unit of analysis clearly in mind is very important as is the use of data relating to those units. For example, the proposition that, on average, Warwick graduates earn more on graduation than graduates of other institutions may be a reflection of selection of students at intake not the fact that they have a Warwick degree or it may be biased by a high number of graduates in a high paying discipline not offered by other institutions. Unless such factors are eliminated or explained, a study linking graduates' salaries to the University they attended may be measuring the wrong variables.

Chronological sequence does not equal causation

Simply because one event follows another does not provide evidence of causation. Neither can correlation be used to infer causation. Everyone recognises that if it rains every time you go out without a raincoat, the fact that going out without a raincoat precedes the rain, and the fact that it rains 100% of the times you leave home without a raincoat, there is no evidence of a causative link, it is merely a statistical coincidence. It is surprising how many researchers seem to forget such simple issues when the interpretation of their data goes against their expectations or desires.

B.2.4 The Concluding Section

Once again there are three or four elements that an author might consider.

Summary

By this point the reader will have read or reviewed a large amount of information some of which presents sequential argument, some of which will be parallel arguments, some will be in graphical or visual form, some in words. A summary of the points that you, as the author, wish your reader to consider while you discuss what it is you conclude from the information presented helps the communication process. It does not leave the reader to draw his/her own inferences from the body of work presented, inferences that may contradict your own and so lead to rejection of or disbelief in the conclusions presented.

Conclusions

The body of the report will have presented a large amount of information, facts, data, analysis, and other forms of evidence that are presumably linked to the original objective of the project. Information for information's sake has little value. It prompts the reader to ask the age old question "So what!!!!?". The question that now needs addressing is "What does it mean?", "Of what value is this piece of work, this report?", "What can I (as the author) infer or deduce from the data and analyses that 1 have presented to you (as the reader)?". In many reports this is the most critical and most difficult section to write. It requires that you be as objective as possible about your own work.

Recommendations

Some reports have a primary objective of making recommendations for action by the recipient. It is unlikely that such will be the case for an LRMF award holder. However, if you consider your most likely readership there are several offerings you might make. For example, if it were a photographic or diaristic record, what advice would you give to someone else planning to use the same technique? If you hiked the Andes, what advice would you offer someone planning a similar trip? Furthermore, what advice would you give any committee (eg the LRMF Committee) if they were considering an application for funding of a similar project?

What did you actually achieve and get out of the project

One of the primary reasons the LRMF exists is to allow students the opportunity to do something that they would not otherwise get the opportunity to do, something that is personal and not a part of their normal programme of study. Therefore, one of the items that make an ideal ending to a report to the LRMF Trustees is whether or not the award achieved its purpose.

[Note: As always, these are areas to consider and not recommendations for sub-headings in your concluding section. For example, conclusions and recommendations are often combined and in some cases, where a conclusion is self evident, there may be a case for omission.]

B.3 THE APPENDED PART

There are many items that might be appended to a report (Glossary, Definitions, Appendices, Bibliography, References, Index, etc). From the point of view of the LRMF report only two need discussion here: References and Appendices.

B.3.1 References

In an academic report this is usually the last section (unless appendices are also included). It is a critical section because it communicates two essential pieces of information. Firstly, it provides a list of all the sources of ideas, information, quotes, etc, that are used in the report. In doing so it indicates breadth and depth of knowledge of the author about their subject matter and the level of validity and credence that can be applied to the information presented. Furthermore it allows any reader to track down the original work if they were particularly interested in doing so. The second function is to give credit where it is due. Presentation of someone else’s ideas or work without due credit is called plagiarism and is the most heinous of academic “crimes”.

Before moving on to actual examples of referencing, it is worth noting the difference between a reference list and a bibliography. A reference list is a list of those works cited in the report. If it was not used it should not be in the reference list. Some disciplines refer to such a list as a bibliography. However, a bibliography has another connotation - a simple (even if not comprehensive) list of works on a particular subject. Unless the report calls for - or the author wishes to include - the presentation of a “useful readings” list then only a reference list is required. What is important is that the two are not confused and that the author does not imply the reading and use of works that did not actually contribute to the report through direct reference or quotation.

In terms of style, there are many ways of referencing material - footnotes, endnotes, alphabetical order, numerical order, etc. - but the only critical thing in any one piece of work is consistency. That said, irrespective of the style that is used, the information required in a reference is fairly standard. [Note: because they accept work from a number of authors, specific works (e.g. academic journals) have their own very specific requirements on the style of the information presented]. The LRMF Trustees expect reports to be correctly referenced (when needed) but leave the style up to the author.

Typical information required in a reference is as follows:

Referencing a book
Author(s), Author's capacity (eg editor, compiler, etc) if appropriate, Chapter title, if appropriate, Book title (usually highlighted in some way - underline, italics or bold), Edition (if other than a first edition), Publishing company, Publisher's location (usually the one nearest the author), Date of publication (of the edition being referenced). Page or page numbers being referred to (if appropriate);

Referencing a periodical (i.e. journals and magazines)
Author(s),Year of publication, Article title (usually placed in inverted commas), Periodical or Journal title (usually highlighted as per book title), Volume and Issue numbers, Exact date of publication (usually in parentheses), Pages (the start end and page of the article or, if you refer to a specific page, then that should be entered).

Newspapers, letters, verbal quotations, etc, all have forms of referencing and the author should review a few styles from journals in their own or appropriate fields of study to decide how they prefer to format their references. A typical reference list from a marketing publication and covering a range of material is appended to this report (see Appendix 1).

B.3.2 Appendices

The function of an appendix is to present relevant supporting material that is too bulky to incorporate in the body of the text. Simple diagrams and tables that support arguments or present critical data and which are discussed in depth should never be relegated to an appendix. One essential point to remember is that any and all appendix material must be referred to and used in some way in the report. It is rarely correct to simply include material just because it has been collected and might be interesting. Appendices have a purpose just like every other element of the report. Some possible materials that an LRMF report author might consider including as appendices are (and note that the sequence should be the order in which they are used in the report):

- A copy of a questionnaire and/or a summary table of key data collected;
- A time table or project plan;
- Maps and/or itineraries with routes and timings marked;

- Budgeted versus actual costs;
- Transcripts and extracts of particular importance;
- Tables offering supporting calculations for figures used in the body of the report;
- Brief explanations of issues you feel the reader might not understand and so might need more information about but which only have a bearing on rather than a critical place in your report (eg a synopsis of some other authors' theory that is subject specific);

Finally, the only thing that should follow the appendices is an index, but the LRMF Trustees do not expect the reports to be indexed (it is a laborious and time consuming task).

C. SOME FINAL POINTERS AND A CONCLUDING STATEMENT

There are so many other points of advice that could be raised (Lesikar's text is 400 pages long) but which go beyond the scope of this brief guide. However, there is one final and some general points that should be borne in mind. Always read and spell check your work prior to submission. Spell checking alone is insufficient since it does not pick up correctly spelt but inappropriately used words (eg resort instead of report, asses instead of assess). Some typographical errors are clear errors, some are funny and some change the meaning of what you intended to say.

It is hoped that these notes provide some sound guidance on the compilation of reports to a "publishable" standard. As mentioned in section B.2 there is no one correct style or method of constructing a report but all reports must communicate their intent as clearly as possible. Although by no means a perfect example, the structure and compilation of this guide might offer some pointers to some of the ideas it contains.

In addition, the author is sure that members of the LRMF Committee and the referees you used on your Fund application would offer advice on how to you might make your report reach the best standard possible - although probably not to the extent of reading multiple drafts prior to submission.

Good luck with your report.

DC Arnott
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Member, Lord Rootes Memorial Fund Committee
Trustee, Lord Rootes Memorial Fund

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Appendix 1: Example of a reference list from a marketing publication

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