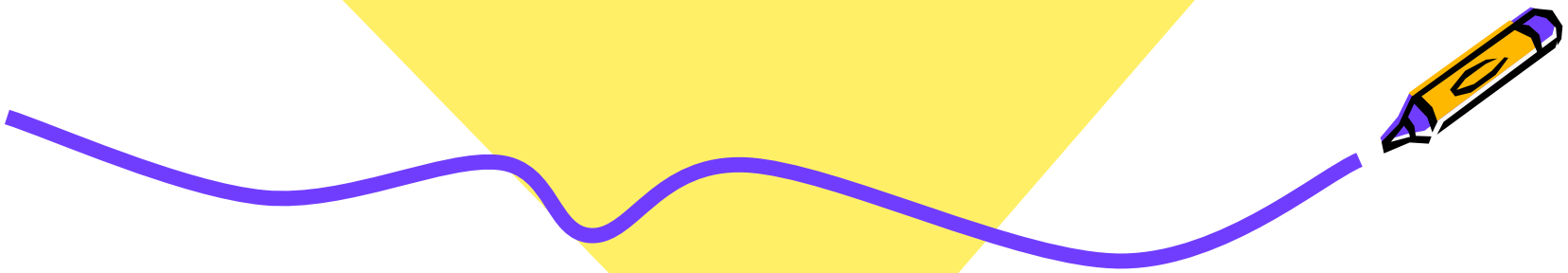
REPORT WRITING SKILLS

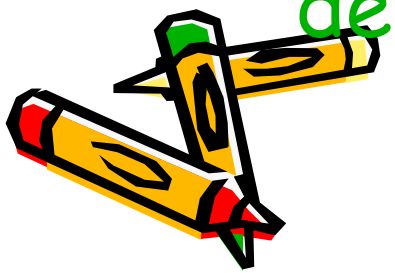


EFFECTIVE WRITING

Behind the 'information' and 'facts' in a report, there is always something else that writers are trying to do.

They are trying to:

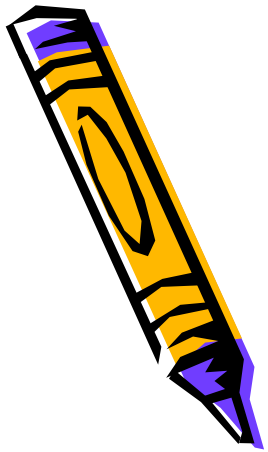
1. Get you believe something is true;
2. Get you to do something to make a decision.



Effective Writing

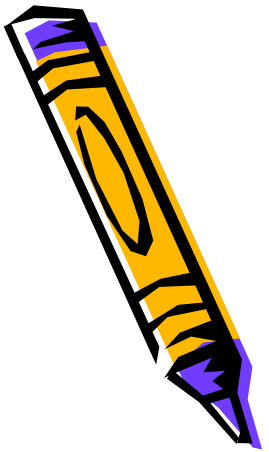
- The quality of your writing depends on the quality of the ideas presented.
- People judge ideas according to how meaningful we find them and put them across.
- Make the report as easy to read as possible.

CONSTRUCTING AN EFFECTIVE REPORT



1. Creating a message
2. Organizing your ideas
3. Writing the first draft
4. Editing for greater clarity.

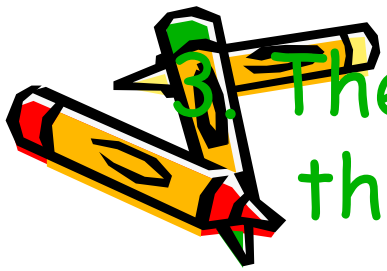
1. CREATING A MESSAGE



The report should have the main message e.g. report of, a summary, etc.

- ✓ The message dictates:

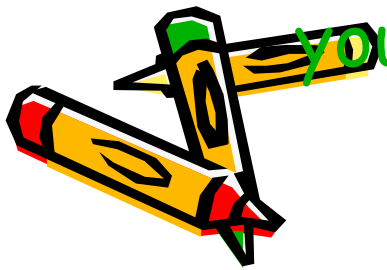
1. The other ideas in the report;
2. How you organize and express those ideas;
3. The information you use to support them.



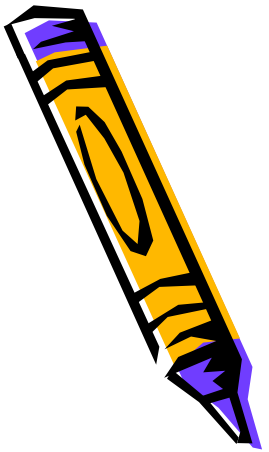
FOUR STEPS IN CREATING A MESSAGE

1. Defining your purpose
2. Analyzing your readership
3. Writing a message sentence
4. Checking your message.

NB: Your report cannot think. It can only display the shape of the information that you have scribed in it.



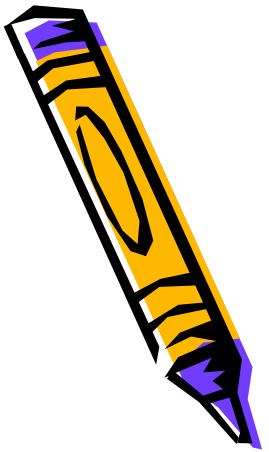
2.ORGANISING YOUR IDEAS



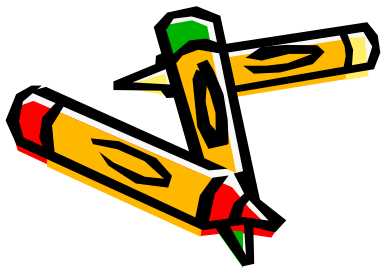
- In order to understand any piece of information in more detail, we need to:

1. Break it into pieces;
2. See how those pieces fit together in a logical sequence.

Three steps of Organizing information



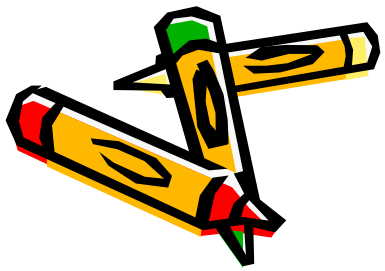
1. Creating a structure of ideas;
2. Collecting the evidence that will support those ideas;
3. Writing an outline that will show the key ideas and their relationship.



Creating a structure/outline

- Creating the structure of your report is done in two stages:

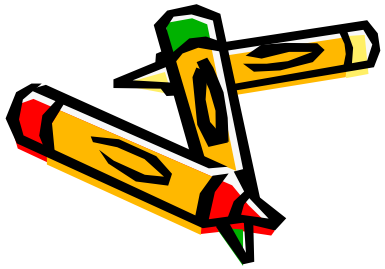
1. *First-stage thinking:* generating ideas.
2. *Second-stage thinking:* organizing the ideas into a structure.



Creating a structure/outline

NB:

- Writing an outline is the final stage of planning your report.
- Constructing the outline forces you to clarify your thinking. By organizing your ideas into a numbered format, you can check that every idea is in the right place and well expressed.



How to use the outline

- The outline has three main uses:

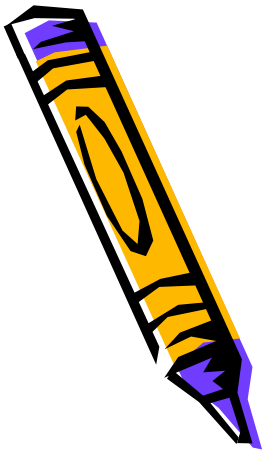
1. To check that your plan is coherent;
2. To help you produce your first draft;
3. As 'work in progress' in conversation with your primary reader.

- It shows you clearly –on one page- what points you want to make, and how they fit together.

Checking the outline

- Once you have prepared your outline, you should use the following checklist to improve it as necessary:

1. Is the message still appropriate to the primary reader?
2. Does the message still express your purpose clearly?
3. What question does the message provoke? (why? How? Which ones?)
4. Are your key points all answers to that question?
5. Can you justify ordering them in this way?
6. Is anything important missing?
7. Is this the document you want to write?

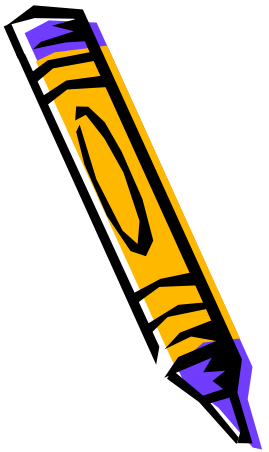


3. WRITING THE FIRST DRAFT

- Writing your first draft should be considerably easier once you have an outline to work from.
- Creating a first draft means expanding the outline by adding:

1. Text;
2. Headings;
3. Numbering;
4. Graphics.

Guidelines for writing the first draft



1. Write quickly: Don't ponder over words. Keep going. Leave gaps if necessary. Aim for a natural flow.
2. Write in your own voice: Expressing yourself in your own way will help you say what you mean more exactly.

   If your reader can 'hear' your voice, reading will be easier.

3. Write without interruption: Try to find a time and place where you can think and write without distractions.

Guidelines for writing the first draft

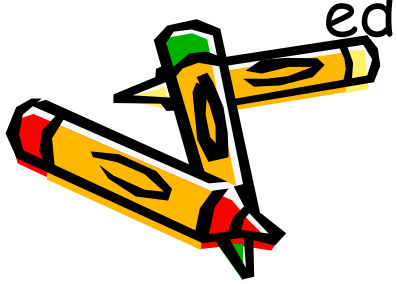
4. Write without editing: Don't try to get it right first time. Resist the temptation to edit as you go. You will tend to get stuck and waste time.
5. Keep to the plan of your outline: Use the sentences from your outline to focus what you want to say. If you find yourself wandering from the point, stop and move on to the next sentence in the outline.

4. EFFECTIVE EDITING

- The aim of editing is to make your first draft easier to read.
- Language is like a *window* through which your reader can see what you mean.
- Editing is like polishing the window. It usually means taking away the words that you don't need.

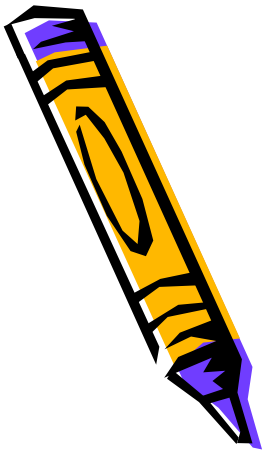
General Principles of effective editing

- *Take a break before you start editing:* Set your first draft aside and do something else before editing it.
  - This will allow you to look at what you have written objectively as if you had not written it.
- *Ask for a second opinion:*
  - Give your report to a colleague or friend whose opinion you respect.
  - It is important that YOU retain the final editing choice.



General Principles of effective editing

- *Edit on paper not on screen:* You can look at the text on paper more effectively.
- *Edit for clarity:* That means using plain English.
- *Edit systematically:* The most efficient approach is to edit the text on three levels: *paragraphs, sentences and words.* Trying to improve your work word by word is time-consuming and tedious.

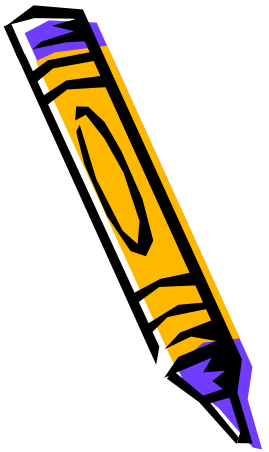


Editing systematically

- Editing on two levels:

1. Construct effective paragraphs;
2. Improve long and complicated sentences;
   - ❖ Problems at the sentence and word level will tend to disappear as you edit paragraphs; other problems at the word level will fall away as you edit sentences.

Constructing effective paragraphs



- Paragraphs display the shape of your thinking.
- Use a new paragraph for each new idea.
- You can edit paragraphs in a number of ways:

1. Managing paragraph length
2. Linking paragraphs together
3. Using key words
4. Using bullet point lists

Constructing effective paragraphs

- Use bullet points sparingly. They are very strong visual devices. You may destroy the effect if you:

1. Use too many lists on one page;
2. Make them too long;
3. Use them for unimportant details.

Improving your sentences

- Sentences exist to express ideas.
- Sentences become difficult to read for two main reasons.

1. *The sentence is too long:* If you use too many words to express an idea, the reader will get lost. Aim for an average sentence length of 15-20 words.
2. *Sentence is poorly constructed:* Sentences are built up out of phrases; group of words that express a single element of meaning.

Improving your sentences

- As a general guideline, aim to express one idea per sentence. If you must put two or more ideas into a sentence, think carefully about how you do it.

Executive summary of the report

- The summary is your report in miniature. It says everything that you said in the report without including any detail.
- Your summary should contain only ideas that are also in the report.
- The summary comes at the very start of a report.
- You usually produce a summary for readers who:

1. Don't want to read the whole report; or
2. Want to work out where to find some part of the report that interests them.

Executive summary of the report

- What to exclude from your summary:

1. Repetitions;
2. Lists;
3. Detailed evidence or statistical information;
4. Examples;
5. Graphics and pictures.

Introduction of the report

- An introduction explains everything that the reader needs to know to put the report into context.
- The introduction will emphasize the question or questions that you are seeking to answer.

Navigation aids

- Report should contain navigation aids to help the reader find their way around. These include:

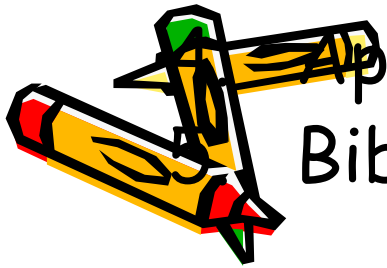
1. Summary;
2. Introduction;
3. Headings;
4. Titles;
5. Number systems.

NB: The title of your report defines the report's contents in as few words as possible. An effective title 'sells' the report to your reader immediately.

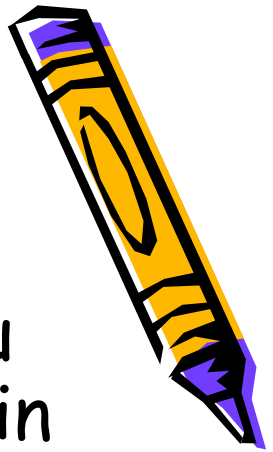
Resource Materials

- Your reader will want to see where your information comes from, whose work you have referred to, who has helped you and what you mean by special terms or abbreviations.
- The main elements of resource materials include:

1. References
2. Glossary
3. Acknowledgements
4. Appendices
5. Bibliography



Resource materials



- A bibliography lists material(s) that you have used but not referred to directly in your report.
- Sources for bibliography will be similar to those for references.
- Glossary: A glossary is a list of explanations of words. Arrange it alphabetically by word explained.
- Appendices: Appendices are useful for including material that does not directly support main ideas in your document.

Use of Appendices

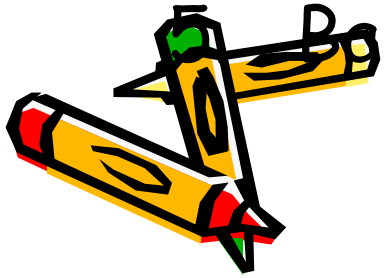
- Use appendices for:

1. Detailed statistics;
2. Complex diagrams;
3. Charts and other graphic information;
4. Computer print-outs (if necessary);
5. Extracts from magazines, newspapers, etc.

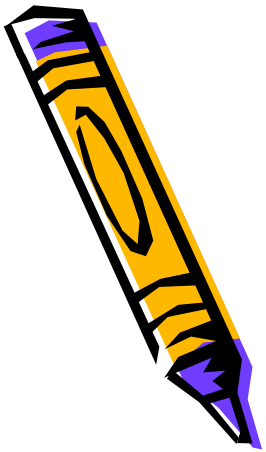
Using graphics

- Graphics (often called 'figures' in reports) make technical information clearer by presenting it visually.
- Common graphics include:

1. Bullet points
2. Tables
3. Graphs
4. Pie charts
5. Bar charts

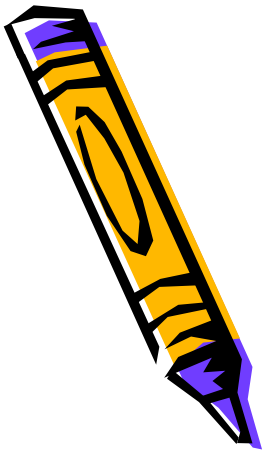


FORMAT OF A TYPICAL REPORT

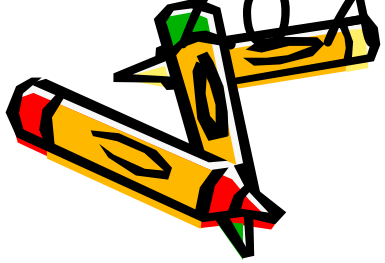
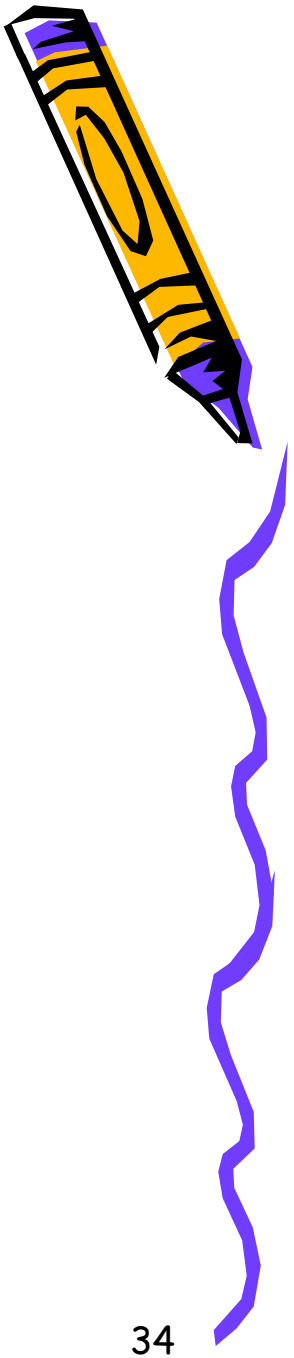


- Title page (top page)
- Author's names (second page)
- Foreword, (if necessary)
- Acknowledgement
- Table of contents
- Executive summary

FORMAT OF A TYPICAL REPORT



1.0 Background
2.0 Methodology
3.0 Findings
4.0 Discussion and conclusions
5.0 Recommendations
6.0 References
7.0 Appendices/annexes



Break