A Formal Report’s Content

The term “formal report,” in many ways, is a “catch all” phrase. Formal reports use some of the same front matter (cover page, table of contents, abstract, etc.) and back matter (Appendix, glossary, etc.), however, the content of the actual report might focus upon an investigation, an informational/historic background that provides context for an upcoming project or design, or a very detailed feasibility or progress report. While formal reports contain various types of information, *students in this class will craft a formal report that contains a solution/recommendation-based body (the body is sometimes referred to as the scholarly article).*

While our textbook does a nice job discussing and illustrating contemporary front and back matter formatting and content types, I want to use this lecture to provide a brief overview regarding the way authors format a formal report’s scholarly argument and the six basic types of content a strong solution-based scholarly article contains. I think you’ll quickly discover that your English 101 composition coursework and essay projects will help you to organize and craft this research-based article.

**The Body/Scholarly Article’s General Formatting**

Your third assignment will contain six informational “fields”:

1. The article’s *Purpose* (i.e., the introduction and thesis)
2. *Background* on the article’s topic
3. Discussion of the *methodologies* used/in use when examining this topic and attempting to remedy the issues that surround the topic
4. *Definition of the issue* that surrounds the topic . . . and the “boundaries” (or *scope*) you establish within your essay and proposed solutions to the issue(s).
5. Discussion of the *findings and conclusions* regarding the impact the issues have upon an industry and/or overall society
6. *Recommendations* (or “solutions”) that will remedy the issue(s) defined in the article.

Just like our feasibility and progress report structures, scholarly articles sometimes combine or need to eliminate certain elements within this standardized list. However, though you might eliminate the “methodologies” section because you intertwine the background and research methods, *all articles* must *contain an introduction, discussion, and conclusion.*

While you will use a standard essay-style informational organizational structure, you will format your article in a manner more accessible to busy professionals. Here are three of the biggest differences:

1. As we have done all quarter, you will use ***single spacing* and block paragraphs**. Translation: though you will cite sources using MLA citations, your document’s physical layout will *not* adhere to the MLA’s “essay” formatting. After all, you’re writing articles and reports, not essays.
2. Again, as we have done all quarter, you will use **visible subheadings** to divide your article’s content. We will continue to use various highlighting techniques to “signal” to our readers where they are within our document.

Visible subheadings provide quick reference cues for your reader *and* reduce *your*

need to craft transitional statements between different article sections. With the

removal of these transitional statements, you will also reduce the quantity of words

you use in your article. Thus, you have more “time” to provide your information.

1. While you won’t need transitional phrases, you will still need to use **topic sentences** at the start of each new idea. In most scholarly articles, each new idea begins with a topic sentence. Thus, if you have three recommendations (i.e., in your article’s “Recommendation” section), each recommendation should begin with a new topic sentence.

While you will use topic sentences, a scholarly article’s topic sentences are direct and

quickly tell readers the focus under discussion. Don’t use flowery language—time is

money—so just name the assertion you plan to make within each section of your

article.

Now that you know some of the basics, I want to provide a few details about the type of content you will place within each of the document’s six sections.

**THE INTRODUCTION**

Introductions provide key contextual information that will help readers understand the argument you will present within your article’s discussion. It’s essential to provide thorough background information, yet provide this information efficiently.

I tend to consider these three sections the article’s “Introduction”:

1. The *Purpose*

2. The *Background*

3. The M*ethodology*

Some people consider the *Background* and *Methodology* fields parts of the article’s body; however, I find that “labeling” these two sections as introductory material helps me to remember to spend the bulk of my word count on the discussion of the issue *and,* most importantly, my recommendations.

***The Purpose***

The “Purpose” or “Objective” section quickly moves readers through the topic’s “basics.” Typically, the first two sentences contain the following information:

1. A statement that tells readers the **purpose of your report/article**. Through your

research, what do you hope to illustrate, prove or disprove?

Ex 1. This report will examine the impact Eastern Indian studies had upon Ralph

Waldo Emerson’s poetry.

Ex. 2. This report will examine the correlation between current online class

enrollment processes and student retention in higher education.

1. Your article’s **thesis statement.** Just like an essay, your report’s thesis

statement will blatantly tell readers your *topic* and the specific *assertion* you will

make before the end of your text. This statement should build upon your purpose

statement and should easily “connect” with the purpose statement.

Ex 1. Specifically, in the poems “The Sphinx” and “Hamatreya,” Emerson tries to

teach American readers that they will never experience Enlightenment unless

they find ways to accept and “blend” Western *and* Eastern spiritual practices.

Ex. 2. College distance education classes and programs continue to generate low

completion and success rates because the current online education structure

remains too solitary and lacks adequate student success strategies.

Immediately after these two statements, quickly explain the following information:

**Who?** What “group” of people will you discuss? For example, who “experiences” the issues under discussion?

**What?** What is the topic, specifically? Your thesis will note your specific topic; however, you want to make sure readers understand how *you* define your topic. To provide a quick definition, remember to use the definition formula (term + type + distinguishing characteristics = definition)

**Where?** Where does the issue under discussion occur? If this is a global issue, yet you only focus on how the issue impacts some aspect of life in the U.S., make sure readers know the “boundaries” of your information.

**When?** When did this first become an issue? If this is an idea humans have pondered since they discovered fire, note this; *however,* also note when, in recent times, the situation moved to a more “urgent” status.

While you want to “hit” all of this information, know that you do *not* need to craft a separate sentence for each of these ideas, you do *not* need to present the information in the order I just listed the questions, and you don’t need to repeat an idea if it already appears in your purpose or thesis statement.

By providing this information at the start of your article, you help readers fully understand the “element” of your topic that you will discuss. In one of my examples above, you will see that I plan to write an article about online education/distance learning. Online education is an *enormous* topic—so large that there’s a frequently-published periodical that only discusses online education issues and strategies. Further, an author can approach online education from several perspectives: what’s happening to the students, what the instructors do, what administrators expect, how schools handle transcript recording of online coursework, how the technicians should establish the online platform’s defaults, etc. However, thanks to my thesis and the *Purpose* section’s brief content, my readers will understand that my article will only focus upon online students’ failure rates, especially in relation to their knowledge of student success strategies.

In all, try to spend no more than six sentences on this *Purpose* information. This is not a “rule.” I simply recommend setting this type of limit to your article’s *Purpose* content because you will provide more specific information in the next two introductory sections.

***The Background***

The *Background* section provides important dates, events, court cases, scientific discoveries, organizations, experts, etc. surrounding the issue you will discuss within your essay’s body. As writers (and humans), you will find your topic’s background information interesting and easy to write. BEWARE! You must craft a *brief* background section. Failure to forget the need for Background brevity (especially in a 1800 - 2100 word work) will lead you down the dark road of summary. Remember: you’re writing a solution-based argumentative article. The introduction material simply “grounds” readers and helps them get ready for your argument.

Because each of you will focus upon a different topic and/or issue, each of you will need to contemplate what general readers *must understand* prior to your first argumentative point. While crafting the *Background* section, ask yourself this: if I wanted to explain this issue and my solutions to my grandmother (assuming she’s not an expert in the field), what are some of the basic things she would need to know before I began to discuss my topic’s problems?

When I’m writing a very complicated article or argument, I have dinner with a friend or family member who works outside of my topic’s subject matter. I then try to explain my argument to that person. In conversation, my friend/family member will stop me, when s/he needs something clarified. I take note of the questions and then determine whether or not most people might need to know that type of information. Typically, the types of questions my dinner guest poses help me to craft my *Purpose* and *Background* sections.

Overall, the *Background* briefly defines the main actors, dates, and terms, as they relate to the topic under discussion (and the focus you will have, in regard to the topic’s issue/s); however, you must organize this information in a logical, more narrative way—do *not* simply put this information in a list of bullet points. Remember: this is an article, not an agenda.

***The Methodology***

The Methodology section discusses the types of experiments, premises, theories, etc. experts have used within your topic’s field. Likely, in the near future, you will write a type of article or report where you must document your findings for a school project. Should this happen, you will want to provide a clear explanation of the ways you gathered your information, and why you elected to use this methodology over all others. Likewise, for the methodology section in your formal report, you will document how *other* researchers went about “measuring” and determining the “best and worst methods” that surround your topic and the issue/s you will focus upon in your report.

Again, this is a brief section—you needn’t provide every major and minor date and/or every major and minor organization and scholar in the field. You only note the methodologies most relevant to your argument’s focus. When providing information about another’s research, try to be concise and to summarize the ideas most relevant to your focus.

**THE DISCUSSION/BODY**

Now that your readers feel “grounded,” they’re ready to understand the issues you discovered and the ways you will propose to remedy the issues. Remember: readers want to know your solutions—everything else in your argument helps to prove the validity of your recommendation *and* illustrates the boundaries you used while determining your recommendations.

I tend to consider these three sections part of my report’s *Discussion*:

1. *Definition of the issue* that surrounds the topic . . . and the “boundaries” (or *scope*) you establish within your essay and proposed solutions to the issue(s).
2. Discussion of the *Findings and Conclusions* regarding the impact the issues have upon an industry and/or overall society
3. *Recommendations* (or “solutions”) that will remedy the issue(s) defined in the article.

***The Definition of the Issue***

In truth, many authors fully cover the issue’s definition within the introductory content. The *Definition* takes the *Background* and *Methodology* information and puts it into context. That is, as the author, you would use the *Definition* section as a “safeguard” that helps to ensure that readers fully understand how the introductory information directly relates to the issue you will begin to present in the following section.

As you might guess, this is a fairly brief section that serves as the final tie between your introduction and the beginning of your argument’s discussion. Since I already discussed how others’ conducted their research, I can simply take this time to show readers how research to date has helped and where the research has flaws OR gaps that need re-examining or re-focusing.

***Findings and Conclusions***

This is the largest section of your report. This section of your discussion will explain the types of “problems” your recommendation will remedy. As the subheading notes, you will discuss in detail—and with supported and interpreted evidence—what *you* found, research-wise, and the conclusions you came to about the “problems” you discovered, how these “problems” impact an industry, society, etc., and why these things must be remedied.

Readers will use this section for additional context regarding your subject. Some readers need this information in order to understand why you think something’s so “flawed” that it needs “fixing.”

As you craft the *Findings and Conclusions* portion of your argument, you cannot only point out your position (i.e., about why “this” is a problem)—*you must acknowledge your opponent’s position.* That’s right: you *must* provide readers with a brief recognition of your position’s counterargument.

Why must we include a counterargument? Well, part of being a persuasive writer requires us to “prove” our expertise on the subject. We must show our readers that we researched and contemplated this topic and issue from every point of view possible *prior* to “truly” coming to the conclusions presented in the report. Further, by acknowledging your opponents’ position, you increase the chances of having your opponent continue to read through your argument and, perhaps, to persuade your opponent to consider a few additional notions.

*A Quick Tutorial on Counterarguments.* **Counterarguments** help your argument *only* when done well. You must place them in strategic locations or at key moments. For example, address the counterargument at the moment you feel the opponent will begin to question your rationale—*and then rebut or refute the opponent’s position.*

So, what do I mean? Well, whenever I point out an idea that opposes my position, I cannot let it linger—*I cannot move to the next idea* until *I explain the “flaw” in the counterargument’s position.* Noting the counterargument’s “flaw” is known as a **rebuttal.**

Sometimes, you will agree with a small portion of your opponent’s idea, but not the entire idea. When this happens, it is okay to acknowledge the places of agreement; however, you *must* follow this **concession** with your **rebuttal.**

There are **two traditional ways to weave a counterargument** into your argument.

1. COUNTERARGUMENT STRUCTURE ONE:*Define the findings---note the counterargument---provide the rebuttal*
2. COUNTERARGUMENT STRUCTURE TWO:Note the counterargument—provide the rebuttal—support the rebuttal by discussing your findings.

Each of these methods provide only a brief glimpse into the opponent’s counterargument—they do *not* give the counterargument equal time—and then immediately transition to the rebuttal. You can use either counterargument strategy at any time within your article’s discussion. Sometimes, one of these counterargument/rebuttal strategies seems “stronger” or “more powerful” at certain place within an argument, so don’t feel that only one of these counterargument strategies work for you; experiment with them.

If you use the *Findings and Conclusions* section to explain the problems your recommendations will remedy—and support your assertions with research that you interpret in relation to your thesis *and* rebuttal of counterarguments—your readers will feel ready to read your recommendations.

Once you ground your reader in context and background, *and* once you “prove” that there are specific, urgent issues that require a remedy, you will present your recommendations.

The most important thing to remember about your recommendations—and your report’s overall Discussion—is the need for parallel discussions between the information you document as “issues” in your *Findings and Conclusions* section AND the solutions your propose in your *Recommendation* section. In other words, if you list the “issues” in 1-2-3 order you must then justify your recommendations in the same 1-2-3 order. A parallel discussion makes readers feel secure in knowing that they haven’t overlooked something—or that you’ve missed something within your argument.

**THE RECOMMENDATION**

There are four ideas you should present to your readers prior to your article’s Works Cited page. They needn’t be in this order (though I often feel this order works better than any other) and they needn’t be four separate sentences. Here are the four concluding statements that ease readers out of an argument and, hopefully, help persuade them to act on your recommendations:

1. *Provide a solution-focused thesis* (ex. By requiring all prospective online students to

complete a free, mandatory online orientation class *prior* to the start of their first

quarter online, colleges will help students understand their “true” learning style and,

thus, increase their online education success rates.)

1. *Note the value/ need to discuss “this” specific issue* (i.e., What might happen if we

don’t work on the issue you just discussed in your article?).

1. *Note the value/the need to discuss the overall topic* (i.e., Why must we continue to try

and improve *all aspects* of this issue?)

1. N*ote the larger social benefit that might/will occur if people begin to implement your*

*documented solutions?* I call this statement the “Call to Action!”

I hope these hints help you organize and craft the body/scholarly article section of your formal report.