

What is the difference between a report and an essay?

Table: Key differences between essays and reports

This list is not exhaustive but provides a set of key differences

	Essay	Report
Visually	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A continuous piece of text structured with sentences and paragraphs. • Headings to sections are optional 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A structured piece of text which is divided into clear sections with headings and sub headings • Each section or sub section contains text structured in sentences and paragraphs • Information may also be presented in a visual form such as tables, graphs and figures
Purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To explore and discuss a topic and present the authors views or conclusions • Aimed at an audience who are already familiar with the key debate in the area 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To make a critical analysis of a topic and produce a practical set of recommendations of future • Aimed at a wide audience some of whom may not already be familiar with the area
Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focusses on ideas and opinions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focuses on evidence (from data analysis, experiments or observations) • Presents and summarises findings of practical research
Purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To demonstrate your understanding of a topic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To demonstrate an understanding of a topic based on evidence gathered and critiqued
Primary academic requirement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To meet the specifications set by the assessor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To meet the specifications set by the assessor
Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informal structure • There is typically an introductory paragraph, a body of argument, some conclusions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formal structure - may include appendices • There is an abstract and keywords (academic and technical reports) or an executive summary (business reports) • Table of contents, list of figures and tables • Introduction section • Some further sections form the body of the report and explain the methods employed and present the evidence collected • A discussion of the evidence • Some conclusions and recommendations
Style	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May be more or less formal, can be exploratory. The author chooses their own voice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are typically written in formal language. The style has a specific practical purpose (which results in a set of recommendations)
Key strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strength of the logical argument 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The strength of the logical argument coupled with or based upon on evidence presented • Demonstration of clear understanding of existing (relevant) research
Conclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recapitulates the argument 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recapitulated key points in the argument and makes a set of recommendations. Discusses the limitations of the report

Exercise

Broaden and internalise your understanding of the differences between essays and reports by using the references cited at the end of this section.

Skim through the documents cited and identify the key components of a report which you would not expect to find in an essay, so that you would be able to explain the differences to another person.

You may also find useful models of potential approaches to saving words by using tables, graphs and figures to

illustrate your report and support your argument.

Follow up exercise

Search the web to find a set of example reports which you consider to be authoritative and generally relevant to web science and the topic of your report.

Example essays and reports for comparison

Essays

Orwell's collected essays are a classic example.

Orwell, G. (n.d.) Collected Essays. [Online]. Available at: <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/o/orwell/george/o79e/> (Accessed: 31 October 2018).

More recent equivalents can be found in publications such as the London Review of Books¹

Ramalingam and Bound edited a 'report' which is actually a modern set of essays, some of which contain diagrams, but all of which follow the basic essay form.

Ramalingam, B. and Bound, K. 2016, Innovation for International Development, NESTA, <https://www.nesta.org.uk/publications/innovation-international-development>

Similarly, what is commonly referred to as a report, compiled for a government department, makes a claim to be an essay on its title page

Barber, M., Katelyn, D. and Saad, R. (2013) *An avalanche is coming* p.77. <http://www.avalancheiscoming.com/>

Reports

A selection of reports all of which include examples of good practice. None of which are identical in their structure and format. They are worth reviewing to help you decide

Acuto, M., Morissette, M., Chan, D. and Leffel, B. (2016) 'City Diplomacy' and Twinning: Lessons from the UK, China and Globally. 28.

Adams, J., Loach, T. and Szomszor, M. (2016) Interdisciplinary research: Methodologies for identification and assessment. London, United Kingdom: Digital Science.

Becker, S.A., Cummins, M., Davis, A., Freeman, A., et al. (2017) NMC horizon report: 2017 higher education edition

Gleed, A. and Marchant, D. (2016) Interdisciplinarity: Survey report for the Global Research Council 2016 annual meeting. Stockport, UK: djs research.

Pan, L. and Katrenko, S. (2015) A review of the UK's interdisciplinary research using a citation based approach. Bristol, United Kingdom: HEFCE.

Sclater, N., Peasgood, A. and Mullan, J. (2016) Learning analytics in higher education [Online]. p.2017. Available at: <https://www.jisc.ac.uk/reports/learning-analytics-in-higher-education>

Wernli, D. and Darbellay, F. (2016) Interdisciplinarity and the 21st century research-intensive university, League of European Research Universities (LERU)

Other relevant references

A short article in Nature News which is interesting and shows good use of graphics

Van Noorden, R. (2015) Interdisciplinary research by the numbers. Nature News. [Online] 525 (7569), 306. Available at: doi:10.1038/525306a (Accessed: 31 October 2018).

¹ <https://www.lrb.co.uk/>