

Advice on producing HSE research reports

Reader-friendly writing – 1-3-25

Writing a research summary for HSE is not the same as writing an article for an academic journal. It has a different objective, and takes a different approach. Research reports were becoming very lengthy and for the busy reader it was difficult to find the relevant information. To keep documents to a more manageable length, HSE has adopted the following approach.

Every report prepared for HSE has the same guidelines:

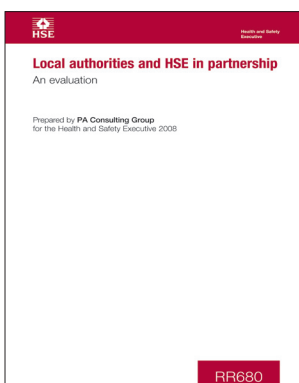
- start with one page made up of between four and six main messages, follow that with an executive summary (up to three pages);
- present your findings in no more than 25 pages of writing, in a language which is easily understood, clear and accessible;
- include all your data in appendices, which can be downloaded separately if required.

Main messages

The 'one' in HSE's 1:3:25 rule is one page of main message bullets. They are the heart of your report, the lessons the reader can take from your research. Do not confuse them with a summary of findings: you have to go one step further and tell your audience what you think the findings mean for them. The messages, per se, may not even appear in the text. They are what are inferred from your report. This is your chance, based on your research to tell the reader what implications your work has on theirs.

This is not to say that you have to come up with definitive recommendations from research that just does not offer them. Be as concrete as you can and then, if you are not ready to draw more conclusions, do not just fall back on 'more research is needed'. Use your main messages to define the questions that still need asking.

How to create the messages? Set aside your text and focus on expressing clear conclusions based on what you have learned. Consider your audience - who are they, and what do they need to know from what you have learned? An example of the key message technique is described below.



1:3:25 Research Report [Research Report RR680 Local Authorities and HSE in partnership]

Key Messages

- The partnership is generally in a good state of health, and has successfully delivered on many of the objectives it set out to achieve four years ago. However, effort and resource need to be committed, to ensure the partnership continues to deliver benefit.
- The partnership has delivered against much of the statement of intent, however, commitments on performance management, auditing and examining the institutions and legal framework underpinning the relationship are perceived to be only partially delivered.

- Overall, the benefits of the partnership were perceived by partners to outweigh the costs. However, it was widely recognised that to sustain the benefits of the partnership going forward, the current steady state costs would need to be maintained.
- To develop further, the partnership must consider implementing a more robust performance management framework, better alignment of planning cycles between partners, and further improvements to the communication and information flow between partners.
- The current successes of the partnership are not consistent across all regions and not all partners are fully engaged. Although partners can deliver health and safety outcomes successfully without taking part in the partnership, the evidence from the research has shown that being involved results in significant benefits to the delivery of health and safety outcomes.

Executive summary

The 'three' in 1:3:25 is the executive summary. These are your findings condensed to serve the needs of the busy reader, who wants to know quickly whether the report will be useful. Start by outlining what issues you were looking at, using language and examples the reader will understand and sum up the answers you found. An executive summary is not an academic abstract; it is much more like a newspaper story, where the most interesting detail goes at the top, followed by the background and context and the less important information further down. This is not the place for more than a line or two about your approach, methods and other technical details. Concentrate on getting the essence of your research across succinctly but not cryptically.

The final report

HSE allots '25' pages for the complete report of your work. This may be a length you are more comfortable with, but do not lapse into academic style just because you have more room. To make sure your writing suits the busy reader, show it to your colleagues. What do they find most useful and interesting? How do they find your language and style?

HSE expects that any significant data or supporting information developed in support of this final report be submitted in full in an appendix. Follow the style and layout of the final report when producing the appendix and make sure it is referenced in the report. As a guide, cover the categories in the report, in the order given.

Context

Outline the problem your research addresses. State the research question clearly. Highlight earlier research and the contribution current research may make. Anecdotes can work well here.

Implications

State what your findings mean for the reader. Note the different types of audiences who may be interested in your work, and if the research has different messages for those different audiences, separate and label them. Notes on how broadly the information can be generalised should go here. This is where the essence of your key messages is found.

Approach

Outline your methods, including the design of the study, the sources of data and details on the sample, the response rate and analysis techniques. Highly technical material can be an appendix; here you should focus on explaining why these details matter, how they might affect the study results and conclusions and why you chose one approach over another.

Results

Summarise your results to show how they support the conclusions you have presented, highlighting themes and messages. Use graphs and tables if they will improve understanding. Results that do not relate directly to the conclusions should be moved to the appendix.

References and bibliography

References in the report should use consecutive superscript numbering (the Vancouver system) and be presented in the reference section, not in the body of the text or the foot of the page.

1 *Causes of damage to power take-off shaft guards: Alternative power supply tractor to implement CRR43*
HSE Books 1992 ISBN 0 11 8863770

2 *The cleaning and gas freeing of tanks containing flammable residues*
Chemical Safety Guidance Note CS15
HSE Books 1985
ISBN 978 0 7176 1365 6

3 *Hand-arm vibration in foundries*
Guidance HSE Books 2001
ISBN 978 0 7176 17982

4. Reader - Friendly Writing - 1:3:25
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Foundation

The bibliography is the place to give information on publications, websites and other useful sources of information for others, it highlights those useful items for researchers to do more reading. It includes useful reading beyond that used in the report, and some easy-to-read pieces to give the reader background. The references and bibliography count as part of the report's 25 pages.

Style points

1 The cover should contain the full correct title of the report, the name of the author (usually the authoring organisation). You do not need to try to layout the cover, title page and copyright pages in any way as this is done by HSE.

2 The title page should contain:

- the full title of the report;
- the title wording should be identical to that on the front cover;
- name(s) of author(s), along with academic/professional qualifications and parent body (usually the contractor);
- where any other organisation has been involved in funding the work, their name needs to be included on the title page;
- a disclaimer using the following words: 'This report and the work it describes were funded by the Health and Safety Executive. Its contents, including any opinions and/or conclusions expressed, are those of the author(s) alone and do not necessarily reflect HSE policy.'
- the title page is a right-hand page and is unnumbered.

3 The copyright page is the reverse of the title page and is the first numbered page, being numbered (ii). It will appear as a left-hand page in the published report. HSE will provide this page so you do not need to supply text. However, place acknowledgements here if included.

4 The contents list is essential and should include:

- all first and second level headings (but not lower headings);
- references;
- bibliography;
- appendices.

The contents list should match exactly the headings used in the report with the appropriate page number against the heading.

5 The body text should be single-spaced with 11-point type and 3 cm margins. Avoid excessive hyphenation at line ends. Use ***bold italic*** instead of underlining where appropriate.

6 Do not indent the first word of the paragraphs and do not number them.

7 Please avoid using colour unless it is necessary as it can cause problems when the report is placed on the Internet.

8 Seek permission to use photographs and illustrations from the copyright owner. Acknowledge the source in the report alongside the photograph or illustration, or separately as a footnote on the copyright page.

9 Every table must have a heading, positioned above the table and centred. Use 11-point, table reference in bold, title in normal initial capital for T of table and first word of caption only, rest of caption in lower case. No full stop at the end of a heading, eg:

Table 1 Example of a table heading

10 Use 11-point for figure captions, figure reference in bold, title in normal. Initial capital for F of figure and first word of caption only, rest of caption in lower case, eg:

Figure 1 Example of a figure caption

11 Use 10-point, italic for photographic captions. Use initial capital for first word of caption only, rest in lower case. No full stop at end of caption.