UNIT 21 LANGUAGE OF FORMAL REPORTS

Structure

21.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit on report writing, we will study and discuss :

- different types of reports,

- language of reports, and

- writing for newspapers.

21.1 INTRODUCTION

From the day you walk into your workplace until the day you leave, there are many reports you will have to write. As a student also, you will have to write reports which might be the bane of your life – but the truth is, you will have to write them no matter where you go. From a simple lab report or a self appraisal report, to a high sounding technical report, reports are a common form of workplace communication.

Reports play an important part in the life of any professional: they are a link between writer and the world. Whether we are in business, administration or academics, a considerable proportion of our working time goes in preparing and reading reports. Think of a busy senior executive. On an average he reads 30 letters and 5 reports everyday. He reads reports when he can spare a little time from his daily work. He may be tired, preoccupied, in a hurry. He may not have the time to read every word in the report and would go through the document quickly to get the gist of the text.

The writer has no control over how the reader reads. She cannot stop the reader from misinterpreting a section or a word or a sentence. The reader cannot ask questions, so misinterpretations cannot be corrected. The writer cannot help the

reader when he fails to understand something, when he is confused and when he gets impatient. The writer has no way of knowing how much information the reader has been able to assimilate. The question to ask is *Who reads our report? How do we make sure that it is understood the way it should be? How do we prevent misinterpretation?*

Imagine the following scenario. The Manager of a software company asks the team leader to submit a report of the project the team is working on. The Manager knows what the team has been doing, but the report is for official purposes. The team leader presents a report which the Manager has no difficulty understanding. However, ten months down the line, a new manager is brought in and when he reads the report it is incomprehensible. *Why does this happen? Who do we write reports for?*

In this unit, we look at different reports which are written for formal and official purposes.

21.2 DIFFERENT TYPES OF REPORTS

Let us see how the Oxford Advanced Learner Dictionary (2000) defines the word *report*:

> **report** *noun* of news 1 ~ **(on / of sth)** a written or spoken account of an event, especially one that is published or broadcast: *Are these newspaper reports true?* • *And now over to Jim Muir, for a report on the South African election.* • *a weather report* information 2 ~ **(on sth)** a spoken or written description of sth containing information that sb needs to have: *a police / medical report* • *Can you give us a progress report?* official study 3 ~ **(on sth)** an official document written by a group of people who have examined a particular situation or problem: *The committee will publish their report on the health service in a few weeks.* story 4 a story or piece of information that may or may not be true: *I don't believe these reports of UFO sightings.* • *There are unconfirmed reports of a shooting in the capital.* on student's work 5 **(BrE) (AmE report card)** a written statement about a student's work at school, college, etc: *a school report* • *to get a good / bad report*

We see therefore that the word 'report' means 'an account given of some matter after investigation or consideration'. In journalism, this could be **a news report** or **a weather report**. In the practical world of business or government, a report is usually requested by people who need information for a specific purpose. It could be **a police report, a progress report, a sales report,** or **a medical report.** We can also have **a research** or **a survey report** which conveys information and recommendations from a researcher/expert who has investigated a topic in detail.

√ **Check Your Progress 1**

We find a large number of reports covering a number of topics in the world. Look at the beginnings of the following reports. Answer the following questions for each report in the space provided.

Who would be interested in reading this report?

What is the aim of the report?

What kind of report is it?

A. Gene therapy rids men of cancer

Two men have been cleared of deadly cancer using genetically modified versions of their own immune cells.

For Mark Origer, 53, the treatment destroyed his tumour, enabling him to attend his daughter's wedding.

The US National Cancer Institute team in Bethesda has also shown it can manipulate immune cells to attack breast, liver and lung cancers.

The modified T cells persisted in 15 other patients treated, but their malignant melanomas remained. Before the experiment, the patients were expected to only live for three to six months because their disease was so advanced. Tests showed the genetically modified T cells used in the new treatment became specialised tumour fighters, the journal Science reports. ..

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B. Call out

On Sunday, March 25, 2001 at 8:28 a.m. Officer Smith and I responded to a call from on-duty guard, City Grand Rapids Highway Department at Market St SW reporting a body lying next to the roadway of 700 block of Chestnut SW.

Arrival

On arrival, we found the body of a woman lying next to the roadway of 700 block of Chestnut SW. She was later identified through her driving license as Juliene Walker, who was 35 years old. She had many wounds on her body.

The duty on-guard reported that he had been notified of the body by an unknown man who had stopped at the City of Grand Rapids Highway Department on Market St SW. He had told the guard that he had observed a body next to the roadway at 700 block of Chestnut SW.

The guard described the unknown man as a white male in his fifties, with gray hair, beard, moustache and glasses. The guard said that .....

C.

This report covers the work performed by Seabold Engineering on jetties for Kovalam Beach from May 1 to June 31, 2006 under the terms of contract SLB-X12.

Background Research

Historical analysis on the beach erosion problem is under way. The Seabold project team has studied records dating back ten years to determine changes over time in the coastline of Kovalam beach. In addition, city records and private proeprty deeds along the coast records and private property deeds along the coast have been analyzed. Local residents have been interviewed, as well as oceanographers from National Institute of Oceanography in Goa, India. The team has also reviewed newspaper accounts describing coastal storms, inland development, and efforts to stop sand erosion at Kovalam...

Are the reports above similar to academic essays that we write? No, they aren't! Reports like the above differ from essays in that they are designed to provide information which will be acted on, rather than just to be read by people interested in the content or ideas for their own sake. Reports have some characteristics that set them apart from other types of writing:

- They are always factual

- They provide information that can be verified

- They follow a specific format

- They are usually aimed at people with a specific interest in that area.

21.3 LANGUAGE OF REPORTS

Different types of writing require different degrees of formality. A report is generally an analysis, evaluation or description based on research. Reports are generally written in a formal style.

Here is a report for you to read. As you read notice the language that is used in the report.

This report was commissioned to examine why the sales volume of Choice Chocolate has dropped over the past two years since its peak in 1998 and to recommend ways of increasing the volume.

The research draws attention to the fact that in 1998, the market share of Choice Chocolate was 37%. The shares of their key competitors such as Venus and Bradbury were 22% and 18% respectively. The size of the chocolate market

then was $36 million. Over the next two years, although Choice Chocolate retained its market share the volume of sales in the whole market decreased to $29 million. It was also found that the shrinking of the market coincided with an increase in health awareness amongst consumers who regarded the milk and sugar ingredients in chocolate as harmful. Moreover, since the second half of 1999, an increasing number of rival 'health candies' have appeared on the market, who claim to offer the consumers a healthy alternative. These factors appear to be the major causes of the decreased sales volume of Choice Chocolate.

Slim Choice is the latest chocolate range put forward by the R & D Department of Choice Chocolate. The report evaluates this range and concludes that it would be an ideal candidate t meet the challenge presented by the market and could satisfy the new consumer demand since it uses significantly reduced milk and sugar ingredients and is endorsed by renowned health experts. According to 97% of the 2000 subjec⁺ ⋅ested recently, it also retains the same flavour as the original range.

It is recommended:

- that Choice Chocolate take immediate measures to launch and promote Slim Choice alongside its existing product range;

- that Slim Choice adopt a fresh and healthy image;

- that part of the launch campaign contains product endorsement statements by renowned health experts;

- that Slim Choice be available in health food shops as well as in traditional chocolate retail outlets.

Let us now take a look at the language used in this report. Compare the following pairs of sentences:

It was also found that the shrinking of the market coincided with an increase in health awareness.

We also found that this shrinking of the market coincided with an increase in health awareness.

It is recommended that Choice Chocolate be advertised as a fresh and healthy product.

We therefore recommend that we advertise Slim Choice as a fresh and healthy product.

The nature of scientific and technical report writing often requires using the passive voice. Professional reports emphasize results and the objects of actions. The actor (who produced the results or acted on the object) is less important. However, the belief that official reports should always use passive constructions is not right! In academic writing, earlier the use of personal pronouns like 'I' 'we' 'you' were treated as informal and unprofessional. However, now their use is permitted.

In technical reports, business reports, and news reports, even today, personal pronouns like 'I', 'we', 'you' are not usually used.

Formal reports use a specific language and vocabulary. We discuss these in the following sections.

21.3.1 Formal Vocabulary

An aspect of reports is the use of a formal vocabulary: *examine* (find out), *reveal* (show), *evaluate* (test), *decrease* (go down) *reduce* (keep down). In reports, it

is important that our writing does not sound too casual. Here are some ways to make language formal.

21.3.2   Verb Noun Collocations

One way is to *replace general verbs with specific ones*. For example, in formal language, 'got' would get replaced by 'received' or 'obtained'. The verbs however should correlate with the noun. For example, we cannot say' got a conclusion' or 'made a conclusion' but can say 'arrived at a conclusion' 'drew a conclusion'. The following task will help you practise matching nouns and verbs that usually go together (collocate) in report writing.

√   **Check Your Progress 2**

Match the items on the left with the items on the right. Some verbs can collocate with more than one noun.

solve	a questionnaire
hold	research
reduce	a meeting
conduct	problems
undertake	costs
make	a survey
draw	data
gather	changes
suggest	recommendations
administer	conclusions

21.3.3   Phrasal Verbs

We can make our report formal by *replacing phrasal verbs with one-word verbs*. For example,

Data management systems can ***help out*** users in diagnosing problems.

Data management systems can ***assist*** users in diagnosing problems.

The verb phrase *help out* is less formal than ***assist***. To help improve the clarity and effectiveness of our writing, we should use clear and concise verbs.

We prefer formal words in reports and not phrasal verbs because the former have one meaning, while the latter can have many meanings. For example, a phrasal verb like 'give up' has many meanings. Read the sentences below, where the formal word is given in brackets after the phrasal verb.

1.   The suspects *gave* themselves *up* (=surrendered).

2.   She *gave* herself *up* to her work (= devoted).

3.   The police *gave up* their search for the man (= ceased).

4. He *gave up* smoking (=quit).

5. She *gave up* writing the novel (=abandoned).

The verbs – *surrender, devote, cease, quit, abandon* – are precise paraphrases for the phrasal verb 'give up'. As we have said, one of the characteristics of a good report is that it is not ambiguous and is easy to understand and interpret. Therefore, a formal word is more effective than phrasal verbs in a report.

√ **Check Your Progress 3**

Reduce the informality of the sentences by substituting the italicized phrases with a suitable form of the words given below.

decrease	restore	create	persuade
investigate	increase	raise	abolish

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1. Researchers have been *looking into* this problem for 15 years.

2. The issue was *brought up* during the investigation.

3. Engineers can *come up with* better designs using CAD.

4. Research expenditure has *gone up* by $350 million.

5. The government wanted to *bring back* the death penalty for murder.

6. The government should *do away with* the regulations restricting drinking hours.

7. After a lot of argument, the management *brought around* the worker union to accept the terms and conditions.

8. It was decided that the prices of the company products would *go down*.

21.3.4 Formal Expressions

Expressions like *a lot, right now, You may ask..., It's high time... part and parcel, easier said than done* are colloquial, and writers usually avoid these informal expressions in reports. Read this sentence:

> Articles on women's sports were placed on the left page and often at the bottom, which is *a place skipped by many readers.*

How would you rewrite this sentence to make it sound formal? We can rewrite it in two ways:

> Articles on women's sports were placed on the left page and often at the bottom, which is *an area often overlooked by readers*.

> Articles on women's sports were placed on the left page and often at the bottom, which is *less prominent*.

21.3.5 Use of etc. and so on

Colloquial vocabulary includes words and expressions that are used in everyday spoken language. They do not provide the exactness needed in technical reports. One rule most of us were taught in school was not to use etc.

Also, run on expressions such as 'and so forth', 'and so on' or 'etc', are not usually seen in formal reports. It is better to complete the sentence properly; and avoid such run on expressions.

21.3.6   Words Suggesting Strong Emotions

The formal style of reports cannot be achieved by strong expressions of opinion and attitude. Judgmental words, "I believe", "I disagree", make the reader become aware of the writer's personal feelings about the content, and emotive expressions like '*It is repulsive…, I was appalled …, The undignified action…* makes the text more subjective and personal rather than factual and objective. A more objective, impersonal tone is achieved through formal and impersonal language.

√   **Check Your Progress 4**

A.   Match the formal phrases in the boxes on the right with the informal phrases on the left.

Informal	**Formal**
a. On top of that…	1. The points for and against…
b. In a nutshell…	2. Nevertheless..
c. Last but not least…	3. However…
d. Every coin has two sides	4. Incidentally…
e. But…	5. To state it briefly / In brief,…
f. Pros and cons of …	6. In spite of
g. By the way…	7. There are advantages and disadvantages to…
h. Even so…	8. Another point is that…
i. Even then…	9. This is because…/The reason for this is…
j. That is why…	10. Finally an equally important point is

B.   Edit the sentences by replacing the informal words and phrases with formal ones.

To take a look at the problem of declining numbers of visitors to Hong Kong, we decided to do a really big survey. We made a questionnaire and handed it out to 2,000 people. We did this because right now we don't have any hard data on why tourist numbers are declining. There's not much information available either on what might bring them back to Hong Kong. The return rate for the questionnaire was really bad at only 13% but this figure should provide a firm enough basis for talking about why tourist numbers are going down.

21.4   REPORTING INCIDENTS AND EVENTS

So far, we discussed the characteristics of a good report. We said that reports are factual, the information they provide can be verified, and that they follow a specific format.

In Unit 22, we will show that news reports, survey reports, research reports, meeting reports, and business reports share most of these characteristics. However, the format and the style of these reports often differ. They have their own characteristics features. That is, the format of a news story is very different from the format of a meeting report (minutes) or a research report. This is because the purpose and the audience are different and these dictate the format of the reports.

Let us look at the language and format often used in news stories. We find a large number of reports covering a number of topics in newspapers everyday. Look at the following report from a British newspaper. Does it have all the characteristics of a report? Which elements do you think are facts? Which are opinions or impressions?

Racoon Survives Scary Bridge Fall

SACRAMENTO, April 10, 2007. A raccoon proved that it's not just cats that have nine lives[1] when it plunged from a bridge above a busy road in America – and survived.

The stripy critter[2] was spotted clinging onto the bridge and the emergency services races to its rescue. They set up a blanket to catch him and tried to lure him away from the edge of the bridge, but the creature jumped. It missed the blanket. Rescuers feared the worst – but then the raccoon was suddenly back on its paws again.

After a check-up, the animal was released back into the wild in Sacramento, California.

"The raccoon seemed to be in fairly good condition, considering what it had gone through," said one of the vets who treated the creature. "We see pretty amazing things so I guess I'm constantly prepared to be amazed. This raccoon is pretty amazing."

http://news.bbc.co.uk/cbbcnews/hi/newsid_6540000/newsid_6542500/6542539.stm

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1.   cats live a long time and survive difficult situations
2.   an animal you feel sympathy or pity for

Look at the format of the news story: the main event – *that a raccoon jumped from a bridge in America and survived* – is given in the very first line. The purpose of the headline and the first line is to arrest the attention of the readers and arouses their interest to read on. The second paragraph gives detail of the incident and the event. The third paragraph gives information about action taken after the incident, and the last paragraph reports the impressions of the vet who was treating the raccoon.

News stories that report incidents and events usually tend to report the facts about the incident first, and then move on to give reactions and impressions of people, and statements made about the event.

The *facts* are:

1)   A raccoon jumped from a bridge over a busy road in an American town.

2)   It survived the fall.

3)   The emergency services came to the raccoon's rescue.

4)   They set up a blanket to stop the fall.

5)   The raccoon was examined after the fall.

6)   It was released in the wild in Sacramento.

Opinions quoted (or stated) are: (these are also based on facts which can be verified)

1) The vet's statements 'The raccoon seemed to be in fairly good condition'.

2) 'We see pretty amazing things so I guess I'm constantly prepared to be amazed…'

3) rescuers feared the worst

The reporter's opinions/ impressions are:

1) a raccoon proved that like cats raccoons also have nine lives'

2) The striped critter

   (This is subjective statement that cannot be verified)

As we see, in writing news stories, the reporters usually report facts which can verified, and keep their personal opinion and impressions to the minimum. These opinions like "raccoons also have nine lives" and adjectives like "stripped critter" are less frequent in regular news stories but since the above is a 'human interest story' such opinions are more acceptable.

√ **Check Your Progress 5**

A. Before reporters write a report, they take notes of events and incidents. The following are a reporter's notes on the felicitation ceremony of the Indian Music Academy awards in New Delhi on April 9, 2007.

73-year-old Asha Bhonsle and music composer Illayaraja among five — honoured by President Kalam — Monday — Indian Music Academy awards. — vocalist Balamuralikrishna and Hindustani singer Girija Devi —also honoured. — 84-year-old sarod maestro, Ali Akbar Khan —selected for the award— could not make it — owing to ill health. The president said —I feel that the nation has a tremendous potential in music and performing arts."

Based on these notes, write a 100-word report of the event.

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21.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we discussed the language used in formal reports. We showed that many of the spoken idioms are not used in reports, and reports require formal vocabulary and an audience oriented writing style. The language of report requires it to be factual, reader-oriented, objective, simple and unambiguous. A good report is clear and states the findings and recommendations clearly.

21.6 SUGGESTED READINGS

Raman, M. and Sharma, S. (2004). *Technical Communication: Principles and Practice*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Forman, J and Kelly, K.A. (1990). *The Random House Guide to Business Writing*. New York: McGraw-Hill Publishing Company.

21.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

1. A news report to inform the general public about development in cancer treatment.

2. A police report to record investigation about a woman's body on the road. This would be treated as evidence in the court of law.

3. This is a work appraisal report presented by Seabold Engineering for management records. It gives details about the work that has been completed during a specified time.

Check Your Progress 2

solve problems; hold a meeting; reduce costs; conduct a survey; undertake a research; make recommendations; draw conclusions; gather data; suggest changes; administer a questionnaire

Check Your Progress 3

1. investigating
2. raised
3. created
4. increased
5. restore
6. abolish
7. persuaded
8. decreased

Check Your Progress 4

A. a 5, b 3, c 6, d 4, e 1, f 2

B. To ~~take a look~~ (it's a phrasal verb) **investigate** the problem of declining numbers of visitors to Hong Kong, we decided to ~~do~~ ('do' is too general) **conduct** a ~~really big~~ (it's informal) **large-scale** survey. We ~~made~~ (it's too general) **designed** a questionnaire and ~~handed it out~~ (it's a phrasal verb) **distributed it** to 2,000 people. We did this because ~~right now~~ (informal expression) **currently** we ~~don't~~

(apostrophes are too informal) **do not** have any **reliable** ~~hard~~ data on why tourist numbers are declining. ~~There's~~ (apostrophes are too informal) **There is** ~~not much~~ (it's informal) **little** information available either on what might bring them back to Hong Kong. The return rate for the questionnaire was ~~really bad~~ ('really' is an informal quantifier and 'bad' is too general) **very disappointing** at only 13% but this figure should provide a firm enough basis for ~~talking about~~ (it's a phrasal verb) **discussing** why tourist numbers are ~~going down~~ (it's a phrasal verb) **declining.**

Check Your Progress 5

A. NEW DELHI: Evergreen melody queen Asha Bhonsle and music composer Illayaraja were among five persons honoured by President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam on Monday with the prestigious Indian Music Academy awards.

The 73-year-old Bhonsle received the award from Mr. Kalam at a function organized here during which Illayaraja, vocalist Balamuralikrishna and Hindustani singer Girija Devi were also honoured.

The 84-year-old sarod maestro, Ali Akbar Khan, who was also selected for the award, could not make it to the function owing to ill health.

"I feel that the nation has a tremendous potential in music and performing arts. Particularly our north-eastern States have unique talent in music and dance," the President said.