

Essay Writing Guide & Report Writing Guide Australia 2026

Thesis · Argument Structure · PEEL · HD vs Pass · Introductions · Conclusions
Report Sections · Executive Summary · Findings · Recommendations ·
Professional Formatting · Worked Examples

Thesis Writing

PEEL Structure

HD Analysis

Report Format

Exec Summary

Recommendations

Produced by the AssignPro Solution Academic Team
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Australian English | 5,000+ Words | Worked Examples Throughout | Updated July 2026

About This Guide

This resource combines two complete writing guides for Australian university students. Part 1 covers essay writing in depth — from decoding the question through thesis development, PEEL structure, HD-level analysis, introductions, body paragraphs, conclusions, and the specific qualities that separate each grade band. Part 2 covers report writing — format conventions, executive summary writing, findings and analysis, recommendations, and professional presentation. Both guides include worked examples, comparison tables, before-and-after demonstrations, and FAQs.

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PART 1

Essay Writing Guide

Thesis · Structure · PEEL · Analysis · HD Strategies · Worked Examples

E1. What Is an Academic Essay? — The Australian University Standard

Definition: An academic essay is a structured piece of analytical writing that argues a specific position in response to a question or prompt, supports that position with evidence from credible sources, and communicates the argument in formal academic prose. It is not a summary of what others have said — it is your own reasoned argument, built on and tested against the scholarly literature.

The academic essay is the most common assessment format at Australian universities across business, law, social sciences, education, humanities, and health disciplines. It is also the format most frequently approached incorrectly — particularly by students transitioning from educational systems that reward description, memorisation, and comprehensive coverage of content.

Australian university essay marking is calibrated against intellectual qualities: the clarity and specificity of the argument, the depth of critical engagement with evidence, the logical rigour of the analytical progression, and the precision of academic expression. These qualities are what the marking rubric measures — not how much you covered or how many facts you included.

Essay Type	Description	Common Disciplines
Argumentative Essay	Takes a clear position and defends it against counterarguments	Law, Business, Philosophy, Social Sciences
Analytical Essay	Examines a topic by breaking it into components and exploring their relationships	Literature, Psychology, Education, History
Comparative Essay	Analyses similarities and differences between two or more positions, theories, or cases	Business, Law, Political Science, Health
Discursive Essay	Explores multiple perspectives on an issue before reaching a supported conclusion	Social Work, Education, Public Policy
Reflective Essay	Connects personal or professional experience to theoretical frameworks	Nursing, Education, Social Work, MBA
Research Essay	Extended engagement with primary and secondary literature on a specific research question	Postgraduate coursework, Honours

E2. Decoding the Essay Question

The most common reason students underperform in essays is not poor writing or insufficient research — it is answering a question they imagined rather than the question that was actually asked. Systematic question decoding before any research or writing begins is the single most high-value investment of time in essay preparation.

E2.1 The Three-Component Deconstruction Method

Component	Definition	How to Identify It
Command word	The verb that specifies the intellectual operation required	Usually the first significant verb in the question: Analyse, Evaluate, Discuss, Compare, Argue, Critique, Examine, Assess
Subject	The topic or phenomenon the question is addressing	The noun phrase that follows the command word
Scope / Qualifier	The limits, angle, or context the question imposes on the subject	Prepositional phrases, time periods, geographic limits, or specified theoretical frameworks

E2.2 Command Words — What Each Demands

Command Word	Intellectual Operation	Grade Risk If Misread
Analyse	Decompose the subject into components; examine causes, effects, relationships	Students describe components without examining relationships — C at best
Evaluate	Weigh the merits and limitations of an argument, theory, or evidence; reach a supported judgement	Students describe strengths and weaknesses without weighing them — C
Discuss	Explore multiple perspectives with evidence; reach a conclusion supported by the discussion	Students list perspectives without evaluating them — descriptive, P to C
Compare	Identify and analyse similarities and differences; commentary on their significance	Students list differences without analysing what they mean — C
Critique	Evaluate strengths and weaknesses using scholarly evidence; go beyond personal opinion	Students express opinions without scholarly grounding — P
Argue	Take a definite position and defend it systematically against the strongest opposing view	Students hedge and present both sides equally without committing — C
Assess	Determine the value, significance, or impact of something using specified criteria	Students describe without applying criteria — P to C

Command Word	Intellectual Operation	Grade Risk If Misread
Examine	Investigate in detail; consider implications and context, not just surface facts	Students describe what happened without interrogating why or with what effect — P

Worked example — Question deconstruction

Question: 'Evaluate the effectiveness of Australia's National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) in improving outcomes for people with disability since its introduction in 2013.' Command word: Evaluate — requires weighing evidence and reaching a supported judgement. Subject: Australia's NDIS. Scope: Effectiveness in improving outcomes; time-bounded from 2013 to present. This question does NOT ask you to describe the NDIS. It asks you to weigh the evidence for and against its effectiveness and reach a defensible position.

E3. Developing Your Thesis Statement

The thesis statement is the engine of the academic essay. It is a single, specific, arguable sentence that directly answers the essay question and signals to the marker what position you will be defending throughout the essay. Every other sentence in your essay exists to support, develop, or qualify the thesis.

A thesis statement is NOT a statement of fact, a description of what you will cover, a question, or a statement of intent. It is a position — a claim that can be argued for or against, that you will defend with evidence.

E3.1 The Anatomy of a Strong Thesis

Thesis Quality	Description	Example
Specific	Names the precise claim, not a general topic	'The NDIS has significantly improved community participation outcomes but has systematically underserved people with psychosocial disabilities.'
Arguable	Can be disagreed with — not a statement of obvious fact	NOT: 'The NDIS was introduced in 2013.' YES: 'The NDIS's funding model creates structural inequity that disproportionately disadvantages rural participants.'
Scoped	Acknowledges the limits of the claim	'While X has demonstrated Y in context Z, this effect is constrained by...'
Directive	Signals the essay's structure to the reader	The thesis implies the order and content of body paragraphs

E3.2 Weak vs Strong Thesis — Before and After

Weak thesis — AVOID

This essay will discuss the effectiveness of the NDIS in Australia since 2013.

Strong thesis — TARGET

While the NDIS has demonstrably improved employment and community participation outcomes for participants with physical disability, structural underfunding of psychosocial support packages and the geographic concentration of registered providers have produced a two-tier system that fails the scheme's equity objectives.

Expert Tip: Your thesis should be the last sentence of your introduction. Write the body of your essay first — once you know what you have argued, the thesis is easy to write precisely. Students who write the thesis first often discover during drafting that their actual argument is different from what they predicted.

E4. Planning Your Essay Structure

An essay plan is not optional — it is the mechanism by which your argument is organised before any writing begins. Students who write without a plan produce topic-organised essays; students who plan their argument produce argument-organised essays. The difference in grade is consistent.

E4.1 The Paragraph-Level Outline

Create a one-sentence summary for each body paragraph before you write. Each sentence should state the analytical claim the paragraph will make — not the topic it will cover.

Topic-organised plan — AVOID

Para 1: NDIS funding model Para 2: Physical disability outcomes Para 3: Psychosocial disability outcomes Para 4: Geographic access Para 5: Counterargument

Argument-organised plan — TARGET

Para 1: CLAIM — The NDIS funding model's individualised package approach has produced measurable gains in employment participation for physical disability cohorts (Carey et al., 2021). Para 2: CLAIM — However, psychosocial support packages are systematically underfunded relative to assessed need, creating a two-tier outcome disparity within the scheme. Para 3: CLAIM — Geographic provider concentration compounds this inequity, with rural participants accessing on average 67% of their approved funding compared to 89% for metropolitan participants. Para 4: COUNTERARGUMENT — Proponents argue early implementation challenges are being addressed through the NDIS Review (2023); however, structural rather than administrative reform is required.

Key Rule: Each planned paragraph makes ONE specific analytical claim that directly advances your thesis. If your plan has paragraph topics ('paragraph about X') rather than paragraph claims ('X demonstrates Y because Z'), rewrite the plan before you write the essay.

E5. Writing the Introduction

The introduction performs three functions: it contextualises the topic, narrows from the broad context to the specific question, and states the thesis. It is typically 10% of the essay word count. It does not provide background history, present evidence, or begin the argument — it signals what the argument will be.

Introduction Element	Function	Length
Hook / Context sentence	Opens with a claim, statistic, or observation that establishes the significance of the topic and draws the reader into the question	1–2 sentences
Topic scope	Narrows from the broad context to the specific subject of the essay; may define key terms if contested or discipline-specific	2–3 sentences
Scholarly positioning (optional)	Briefly signals where the essay sits in relation to the key scholarly debate — useful in longer essays and postgraduate work	1–2 sentences
Thesis statement	The final sentence. Direct, specific, arguable. Answers the question.	1 sentence

Worked introduction example (800-word business essay)

Effective corporate governance is widely recognised as a determinant of long-term firm performance and investor confidence. In Australia, the governance failures exposed by the 2019 Royal Commission into Misconduct in the Banking, Superannuation and Financial Services Industry have renewed scrutiny of board-level accountability mechanisms and their adequacy under the ASX Corporate Governance Principles. While reforms introduced following the Commission have addressed some procedural deficiencies, the evidence suggests that structural conflicts of interest at board level remain insufficiently addressed by current regulatory frameworks, and that mandatory reform of board composition requirements is necessary to prevent recurrence.

Note: The introduction moves from broad significance → specific context → positioning relative to the debate → thesis. It does not begin the argument or present evidence. The thesis is the final sentence.

E6. Body Paragraphs — The PEEL Method

The PEEL structure — Point, Evidence, Explanation, Link — is the standard paragraph architecture used across Australian universities. It is not a rigid formula but a logical sequence that ensures every paragraph makes an analytical claim, supports it with evidence, and connects it back to the central argument.

PEEL Element	Function	Marker Signal
P — Point (Topic sentence)	Opens the paragraph with the specific analytical claim this paragraph will prove. Should be a complete, arguable sentence — not a topic label.	Clarity of argument; analytical intent
E — Evidence	Cited support for the claim. Can be paraphrase, summary, or direct quote (used sparingly). Must be from credible scholarly or professional sources.	Source quality and range; citation accuracy
E — Explanation	Your analytical commentary on the evidence: what does it demonstrate, why does it matter, what are its limitations, how does it relate to competing evidence?	Critical analysis — the most heavily weighted dimension
L — Link	Connects the paragraph's point back to the thesis and/or forward to the next paragraph. Maintains the logical flow of the argument.	Coherence; argument maintenance

Worked PEEL paragraph — Distinction to HD level

POINT: The NDIS's individualised funding model has produced measurable improvements in employment participation for participants with physical disability, providing preliminary evidence of the scheme's structural effectiveness in this cohort. EVIDENCE: Carey et al. (2021) found that employment rates among NDIS participants with physical disability increased by 14 percentage points in the three years following scheme entry, compared with a 3-point increase in the matched non-participant cohort — a difference the authors attribute to the flexibility of individualised support packages in funding workplace modifications and assistive technology. EXPLANATION: This finding is significant because it demonstrates that the NDIS funding mechanism can translate directly into labour market outcomes when support packages are adequately matched to participant need. However, the cohort specificity of Carey et al.'s findings — limited to physical disability — constrains the generalisability of this conclusion, as the relationship between funding flexibility and outcomes may differ substantially for participants whose support needs are less well-defined by standardised assessment tools. LINK: This evidence of cohort-specific effectiveness establishes the benchmark against which the scheme's performance for psychosocial participants must be evaluated — an evaluation that reveals a more complex picture.

E7. Critical Analysis — Moving From C to HD

Critical analysis is the quality that Australian markers most consistently identify as the differentiator between Credit and Distinction work. Understanding what it looks like on the page — not just as a concept — is the key to moving between grade bands.

E7.1 The Four Moves of Critical Analysis

Move 1 — Evaluate the evidence

Do not treat all sources as equally authoritative. Comment on the strength of the evidence: Was the study large enough? Was the methodology appropriate? Does the conclusion follow from the data? Is the source recent enough to be current?

Credit vs HD example

Credit level: 'According to Smith (2021), X is the case.' Distinction level: 'Smith (2021) demonstrates X; however, the study's cross-sectional design limits causal inference, suggesting that the relationship between X and Y requires longitudinal confirmation.'

Move 2 — Compare competing positions

Where the literature contains competing arguments, present both and evaluate which is better supported — do not merely describe the disagreement.

Credit vs HD example

Credit level: 'Smith (2021) argues X while Jones (2022) argues Y.' HD level: 'While Smith (2021) contends X on the basis of survey evidence across twelve organisations, Jones (2022) challenges this finding using longitudinal data from 847 firms, suggesting that X may reflect short-term rather than structural factors. The weight of evidence supports Jones's interpretation, though neither study controls for...'

Move 3 — Interrogate assumptions

Identify the assumptions on which an argument rests and evaluate whether they hold in the specific context of your essay.

Credit vs HD example

Credit level: Applies frameworks without questioning their premises. HD level: 'This application of agency theory assumes rational self-interest as the primary motivator of board behaviour; however, institutional theory suggests that mimetic isomorphism — boards following peer conventions regardless of instrumental logic — may better explain the pattern observed in Australian financial sector governance.'

Move 4 — Surface implications

After establishing what the evidence demonstrates, push to what this means beyond the immediate context of your argument.

Credit vs HD example

Credit level: Summarises what was found. HD level: 'If this analysis is correct, the implication for regulatory design is that board composition reform addresses the proximate rather than the structural cause of governance failure — suggesting that disclosure requirements alone are insufficient and that mandatory independence thresholds are necessary.'

E8. Using Evidence Effectively

Evidence Use Pattern	Grade Signal	What to Do Instead
Quoting extensively without commentary	Pass — demonstrates reading but not analysis	Paraphrase and follow every piece of evidence with at least two sentences of analytical commentary
Citing sources as authorities ('According to Smith, X is true')	Credit — demonstrates engagement but not evaluation	Evaluate why Smith's evidence is or is not persuasive and what its limitations are
Using only one or two sources per paragraph	Credit — limited literature engagement	At Distinction level, paragraphs typically draw on 2–4 sources and compare their positions
Summarising the literature instead of using it to support claims	Pass to Credit — descriptive rather than analytical	Each piece of evidence should be explicitly tied to your thesis — 'this demonstrates that...'
Selecting evidence that only supports your argument	Credit — one-dimensional analysis	Acknowledge and address the strongest counterevidence — this strengthens rather than weakens your argument

E9. Writing the Conclusion

The conclusion is the second most commonly miswritten section of the academic essay (after the introduction). Most students write a conclusion that restates what they have already said. A Distinction or High Distinction conclusion synthesises what the argument has established and draws out its implications.

Conclusion Element	Function	What to Avoid
Restatement of thesis (restated, not repeated)	Opens with a revisited version of your thesis — now as a demonstrated conclusion rather than a predicted position	Do not copy your thesis verbatim — it should now read as a proven claim, not a prediction
Synthesis of key findings	In 2–3 sentences, draw together the main analytical points that established your thesis — how they relate to each other, what pattern they collectively demonstrate	Do not introduce new evidence or arguments — the conclusion closes, not extends
Significance / Implications	The 'so what?' — what does your argument mean beyond the essay itself? Practical implications, theoretical contributions, directions for further research	Do not make claims that are not grounded in your essay's argument
Closing statement	A final sentence that frames the significance of the topic and your contribution	Avoid clichés ('In conclusion, it is clear that...') and vague generalisations

Worked conclusion (from the NDIS essay)

The evidence examined in this essay establishes that the NDIS has produced meaningful but uneven outcomes — demonstrably improving employment participation for physical disability cohorts while systematically underserving psychosocial participants through structural underfunding and the geographic concentration of registered providers. These patterns are not implementation failures amenable to administrative correction; they reflect design choices embedded in the scheme's funding architecture and provider registration framework. The implication for policy is that the NDIS's equity objectives cannot be achieved without structural reform of the plan budget adequacy assessment process and mandatory rural provider incentive mechanisms. Without these changes, the scheme will continue to deliver differential outcomes that contradict its stated commitment to individualised, needs-based support.

E10. Essay Transitions and Cohesion

A well-structured essay feels like a continuous argument, not a series of separate paragraphs. Transitions perform the logical connective work that guides the reader through the argument and makes the relationship between paragraphs explicit.

Transition Function	Examples
Adding evidence to support a point	Furthermore, In addition, Moreover, This is corroborated by, Consistent with this finding, Supporting this position
Introducing a counterargument	However, Nevertheless, Conversely, In contrast, This position is challenged by, Notwithstanding this
Qualifying or limiting a claim	While, Although, Despite, Nonetheless, It should be noted that, With the caveat that, This finding is limited by
Drawing an inference	This suggests that, This indicates, These findings imply, Taken together, these patterns demonstrate, The significance of this is
Moving to the next point	Having established X, the question of Y becomes central, Building on this analysis, Turning to, This context establishes the basis for
Concluding a sub-argument	In sum, Collectively, these findings demonstrate, The weight of evidence therefore supports, This analysis confirms

E11. What Markers Look For — Grade Band Comparison

Dimension	Pass (50–64%)	Credit (65–74%)	Distinction (75–84%)	HD (85%+)
Thesis	Topic statement; no clear position	Position stated but imprecise	Clear, arguable thesis directly answering question	Specific, nuanced thesis with scope qualification
Analysis	Primarily descriptive; facts presented without commentary	Some analysis; evidence followed by commentary but lacking depth	Consistent analysis; evaluates evidence and positions	Sophisticated analysis; interrogates assumptions; surfaces implications
Evidence	3–5 sources; mostly textbooks or websites	6–10 sources; mixture of peer-reviewed and secondary	10–15 peer-reviewed sources; engaged comparatively	15+ sources; primary literature; sources compared and evaluated
Structure	Organised by topic; paragraphs not clearly linked	Logical sequence; some structural weaknesses	Argument-driven structure; clear progression to thesis	Seamless argument progression; transitions are analytical, not mechanical
Conclusion	Restates introduction	Summarises main points adequately	Synthesises argument; touches on implications	Full synthesis; draws out theoretical and practical significance
Language	Readable but contains informal expressions	Formal and clear with minor precision issues	Precise and formal throughout; well-controlled hedging	Scholarly precision; economical; no wasted words

E12. Common Essay Mistakes and How to Fix Them

No thesis — the essay describes rather than argues

The mistake: The introduction covers the topic without committing to a position. The essay then proceeds to summarise what scholars have said on each aspect of the topic.

The fix: Write a specific, arguable thesis as the final sentence of your introduction. Every body paragraph must support that thesis. If it does not, either rewrite the paragraph or revise the thesis.

Paragraph sprawl — one paragraph, multiple points

The mistake: A single paragraph covers three or four different ideas, none developed adequately. The marker cannot determine what the paragraph's claim is.

The fix: One claim per paragraph. If you find yourself moving to a second idea, start a new paragraph. Well-developed body paragraphs at university level are typically 150–250 words.

Evidence substituting for analysis

The mistake: The paragraph presents three or four quotes or paraphrases in succession with minimal commentary between them. The student has done the research but not the analysis.

The fix: After every piece of evidence, write at least two sentences of analytical commentary: What does this evidence demonstrate? What are its limits? What does it mean for your argument?

Ignoring the counterargument

The mistake: The essay presents only evidence that supports the thesis and ignores contradictory scholarship. This reads as one-dimensional rather than analytically sophisticated.

The fix: Include a paragraph that presents and then rebuts the strongest opposing position. This demonstrates intellectual honesty and strengthens rather than weakens the overall argument.

Introduction that starts with a dictionary definition

The mistake: 'According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, governance is defined as...' This is the most common opening cliché in student essays and signals to the marker that the student does not know how to open academically.

The fix: Open with a claim, a significant statistic, or an observation about the contemporary relevance of the topic. Reserve definitions for the body of the essay if they are genuinely contested.

E13. Essay Writing FAQs

Q1. How long should my introduction and conclusion be?

Both should be approximately 10% of the total word count. For a 2,000-word essay, that is around 200 words each. For a 3,000-word essay, 300 words each. The body paragraphs constitute the remaining 80%.

Q2. Should I use headings in my essay?

In most disciplines, academic essays do not use headings — they use continuous prose with strong paragraph topic sentences. The exceptions are some science and health disciplines, some postgraduate programs, and some reflective essays. Check your unit outline and marking rubric. If headings are not explicitly permitted, do not use them.

Q3. How many body paragraphs should I have?

This depends on the word count and the complexity of your argument. A 2,000-word essay typically has 4–6 body paragraphs. A 3,000-word essay typically has 6–9. Each paragraph should make one complete analytical point with adequate evidence and commentary — quality and development matter more than quantity.

Q4. Can I use first person ('I') in an essay?

In most Australian university essay contexts, third person is required. First person is appropriate in reflective essays and some qualitative research contexts. Check your unit outline. Even in disciplines that permit first person, avoid phrases like 'I think' or 'I believe' — use 'I argue' or 'this essay contends' if first person is allowed.

Q5. How do I know if my analysis is deep enough?

Apply the 'so what?' test to every piece of evidence you present. After citing a source, ask: 'What does this mean for my argument? What are the implications? What does it tell us that we did not know before? What are the limits of this evidence?' If you cannot answer these questions about a piece of evidence, you are not yet analysing — you are describing.

PART 2

Report Writing Guide

Structure · Executive Summary · Findings · Analysis · Recommendations

R1. What Is an Academic Report? — Key Differences From an Essay

Definition: An academic report is a structured, purpose-driven document that presents findings, analysis, and recommendations on a specific problem, situation, or research question. Unlike an essay — which makes an argument through continuous prose — a report uses clearly labelled sections, headings, bullet points, tables, and figures to communicate information efficiently to a specified audience.

Dimension	Essay	Report
Purpose	Argues a position; demonstrates analytical thinking	Presents findings; solves a problem; informs decision-making
Structure	Continuous prose; no headings (usually)	Clearly labelled sections with numbered headings
Audience	Academic — the marker as scholarly reader	Professional — may be a manager, client, government body, or board
Tone	Formal academic prose; complex sentences acceptable	Formal but direct; professional register; plain language for key messages
Format	Paragraphs; no bullet points; no tables (usually)	Headings, subheadings, bullet points, tables, figures acceptable and expected
Voice	Third person; no personal recommendations	May include direct recommendations in first or third person
Conclusion	Synthesises argument; no new recommendations	Draws conclusions from findings; followed by specific recommendations

R2. Report Types at Australian Universities

Report Type	Typical Structure	Common Disciplines
Business Report	Executive Summary, Introduction, Situation Analysis, Findings, Conclusions, Recommendations, References, Appendices	Business, Management, Commerce, MBA
Research Report	Abstract, Introduction, Literature Review, Methodology, Results, Discussion, Conclusions, References	Psychology, Health Sciences, Social Sciences, Education
Case Study Report	Executive Summary, Background, Problem Analysis, Options Evaluation, Recommendations, Implementation Plan	Business, Law, Social Work, Health
Laboratory Report	Title, Abstract, Introduction, Materials and Methods, Results, Discussion, Conclusion, References	Science, Engineering, Nursing, Health
Audit / Review Report	Executive Summary, Scope and Methodology, Findings, Risk Rating, Recommendations, Management Response	Accounting, Business, Public Administration
Consulting / Advisory Report	Executive Summary, Client Brief, Current State Analysis, Gap Analysis, Recommendations, Implementation Roadmap	MBA, Business, Public Policy

R3. Standard Report Structure — Section by Section

Section	Purpose	Length Guide	Common Errors
Title Page	Report title, student name/ID, unit code, lecturer name, submission date, word count	1 page	Missing elements; incorrect date format
Executive Summary	Standalone overview: purpose, key findings, main recommendations. Written last; read first.	5–10% of body	Too long; introduces new material not in report; written before report
Table of Contents	Lists all numbered headings and page numbers. Auto-generated in Word.	1 page (reports >1,500 words)	Not updated after final edits; incorrect page numbers
Introduction	Background context, purpose of the report, scope and limitations, overview of structure	5–10%	Too broad; includes findings; defines terms unnecessarily
Findings / Analysis	Presents evidence, data, and analysis under logical subheadings. This is the main body of the report.	60–70%	Presents findings without analysis; no subheadings; excessive quotes
Conclusions	Draws together what the findings demonstrate; directly answers the report's purpose	5–10%	Introduces new information; repeats findings without synthesis
Recommendations	Specific, actionable, numbered. Directly tied to conclusions.	5–10%	Vague; not numbered; not connected to findings; too many or too few
References	All cited sources in required referencing style. Separate page.	Not in word count	Inconsistent formatting; sources cited in report not listed
Appendices	Supporting material too detailed for the body: raw data, additional tables, survey instruments	Not in word count	Essential material buried in appendices; appendices not referenced in body

R4. Writing the Executive Summary

The executive summary is the most-read section of any professional or academic report and the section most frequently written incorrectly. It must function as a standalone document — a busy executive or marker who reads only the executive summary should understand the report's purpose, its key findings, and its main recommendations without reading further.

Executive Summary Rule	Detail
Write it last	The executive summary can only be accurate if the report is complete. Students who write it first produce summaries that do not match the finished report.
Include the three essentials	Purpose of the report (what question it answers), key findings (what the analysis established), main recommendations (what should be done).
Keep it proportionate	5–10% of the body word count. For a 2,000-word report, approximately 150–200 words. For a 3,000-word report, 200–300 words.
Standalone test	Remove the executive summary from the report and read it alone. Does it make complete sense? If it refers to sections or details not explained within it, revise.
No new information	Every claim in the executive summary must appear in the body of the report. The executive summary summarises — it does not introduce.
Do not use dot points for the body	Write in prose, not bullet points. Bullet points are acceptable for listing the main recommendations within the executive summary.

Worked executive summary (consulting report on workplace wellbeing)

This report examines the drivers of employee turnover at Meridian Financial Services and evaluates the adequacy of current retention strategies. Analysis of exit interview data, employee engagement survey results, and benchmarking against industry practice reveals that turnover is primarily attributable to inadequate career development pathways and a perceived disconnection between organisational values and management practice — factors not addressed by the current remuneration-focused retention approach. The report recommends the implementation of a structured career progression framework, mandatory manager coaching accreditation, and a quarterly values alignment review process. Full implementation is projected to reduce voluntary turnover from 22% to below 14% within 18 months, representing an estimated \$2.4 million annual saving in replacement and onboarding costs.

R5. Introduction and Background

The report introduction provides the context a reader needs to understand why the report was commissioned, what it sets out to achieve, what it covers and does not cover, and how it is organised. It is not an executive summary — it does not present findings or recommendations.

Introduction Element	Content	What to Avoid
Background / Context	The situation or problem that prompted the report; relevant industry, organisational, or policy context	Too much historical background; padding; content already in the executive summary
Purpose Statement	Clear statement of what the report aims to achieve and the question it addresses	Vague purpose ('This report will discuss X') — be specific about what the report determines or recommends
Scope and Limitations	What the report includes and excludes; constraints on the analysis (time, data availability, access); what is outside the scope	Omitting limitations entirely; over-qualifying to the point of undermining the report
Report Structure	Brief signposting of what each section covers ('Section 3 presents...')	Describing content in detail — this belongs in the relevant sections

R6. Findings and Analysis

The findings and analysis section is the intellectual core of the report. It is where data, evidence, and research are presented and interpreted. The most common structural mistake is presenting findings and analysis separately — 'here is what we found' followed by 'here is what it means'. In most academic report formats, findings and analysis are integrated: evidence is presented and immediately analysed under each subheading.

R6.1 Subheading Architecture

The findings section should be divided by logical analytical subheadings — not by source type or chronology. Each subheading should address one analytical dimension of the report's central question.

Weak subheading structure — AVOID

3.1 Literature Review Findings 3.2 Survey Results 3.3 Interview Findings

Strong subheading structure — TARGET

3.1 Career Development Pathways: Current Provision and Employee Perception Gap 3.2 Management Practice and Values Alignment: Where Retention Risk Is Concentrated 3.3 Remuneration Competitiveness: Adequate but Insufficient as a Standalone Strategy

R6.2 Integrating Evidence in Report Analysis

Evidence Type	How to Integrate It	Citation Requirement
Data / Statistics	Present the figure, explain its significance, and connect it to the analytical claim of the subheading	Cite the source of the data immediately after presenting it
Literature / Scholarship	Use to provide theoretical grounding for your analysis or to benchmark findings against industry or research evidence	APA 7 in-text citation; full reference in reference list
Primary data (interviews, surveys)	Summarise key findings; use representative quotes sparingly; quantify where possible	Describe your data collection method in the introduction or a methodology section
Tables and figures	Place immediately after the text that introduces them; include a figure/table number and descriptive caption	If sourced externally, cite below the table/figure

R7. Conclusions

The conclusions section answers the report's central question on the basis of the findings and analysis. It synthesises what the evidence collectively demonstrates — it does not introduce new information, and it does not repeat the findings section in condensed form.

Conclusions Do	Conclusions Do Not
Answer the report's purpose statement directly	Introduce new evidence or arguments
Draw together the key analytical findings from across all subheadings	Repeat the findings section with minor reordering
Identify patterns, tensions, or gaps that the analysis revealed	Present recommendations (these belong in the Recommendations section)
Acknowledge significant limitations that affect the conclusions	Overqualify to the point of undermining the report's usefulness
Lead naturally into the Recommendations section	End without a clear statement of what the findings collectively establish

R8. Recommendations

Recommendations are the practical output of the report — the actions that should be taken on the basis of the findings and conclusions. They are among the most frequently written poorly sections in student reports, typically because students treat them as an afterthought rather than as the purpose toward which the entire report has been building.

Recommendation Quality	Characteristic	Example
Weak — Vague	Does not specify what should be done, by whom, when, or how success will be measured	Recommendation 1: The organisation should improve its career development opportunities for staff.
Moderate — Specific but incomplete	Names an action but lacks accountability, timeframe, or success indicators	Recommendation 1: Introduce a structured career development framework for all employees.
Strong — SMART	Specific action, accountable party, realistic timeframe, measurable outcome, linked directly to a finding in the report	Recommendation 1: The People and Culture Director should implement a tiered career progression framework across all business units by Q2 2027, with individual development plans reviewed biannually, targeting a 40% reduction in 'lack of career progression' as an exit reason within 18 months of implementation.

Expert Tip: Number your recommendations (Recommendation 1, Recommendation 2...) and prioritise them — not all recommendations are equal urgency. Consider adding a brief implementation timeline table showing which recommendations should be actioned immediately, in the short term (3–6 months), and in the medium term (6–18 months). This demonstrates professional analytical thinking and significantly strengthens the report's practical value.

R9. Report Formatting and Presentation

Formatting Element	Standard / Requirement
Font	Times New Roman 12pt or Arial/Calibri 11pt — consistent throughout
Line spacing	1.5 or double for body text; single spacing in tables and bullet lists
Margins	2.54 cm (1 inch) standard on all sides
Heading hierarchy	Numbered: 1. Section Title (bold, 14pt); 1.1 Subsection (bold, 12pt); 1.1.1 Sub-subsection (bold italic, 11pt)
Page numbers	Bottom centre or bottom right; do not number title page; use Roman numerals for front matter if required
Tables and figures	Each numbered (Table 1, Figure 1); descriptive caption above tables, below figures; sourced where externally derived
Bullet points	Acceptable in reports (unlike essays); use consistently — not mixed with continuous prose in the same paragraph
Word count	Typically excludes title page, executive summary, table of contents, references, and appendices — verify with your unit outline
File format	PDF for final submission unless Word is specified; ensure all formatting is preserved in PDF conversion

R10. Referencing in Reports

Referencing in academic reports follows exactly the same rules as in essays — every claim derived from an external source must be cited, and a complete reference list must be provided. The referencing style is determined by your discipline and unit outline (typically APA 7 for business and health disciplines — see the APA 7 Guide in this series for full examples).

Report Referencing Rule	Detail
Cite in-text throughout the body	Every finding, statistic, or claim from an external source cited immediately after the claim — not just in the literature review section
Tables and figures	If a table or figure is sourced from external material, cite the source in the caption: 'Source: ABS (2023)' or '(Adapted from Smith, 2022)'
Executive summary citations	The executive summary typically does not contain in-text citations — it summarises findings established and cited in the body
Appendix references	Any source used in an appendix must also appear in the main reference list
Reference list placement	Separate page after the conclusions / recommendations; before appendices

R11. Common Report Mistakes and How to Fix Them

Executive summary written first and not updated

The mistake: The executive summary was written before the report was finalised. It refers to findings or recommendations that were changed during drafting, creating inconsistencies between the summary and the report body.

The fix: Write the executive summary last. After writing it, do a final check: every finding and recommendation in the executive summary must match exactly what appears in the report body.

Findings presented without analysis

The mistake: The findings section presents data and evidence but does not interpret what they mean for the report's central question. The section reads as a data dump rather than an analytical argument.

The fix: Under each subheading, present the evidence AND immediately explain what it demonstrates, why it matters, and how it relates to the report's purpose. Analysis must be integrated with findings.

Recommendations not linked to findings

The mistake: The recommendations address issues not discussed in the findings, or make claims that go beyond what the analysis established. Markers cannot trace the logical path from finding to recommendation.

The fix: For every recommendation, identify the specific finding or conclusion that justifies it. If you cannot identify one, the recommendation does not belong in this report.

Vague recommendations

The mistake: 'The organisation should improve communication.' 'Management should consider reviewing its processes.' These tell the reader nothing actionable.

The fix: Apply the SMART framework: Specific action, Measurable outcome, Accountable party, Realistic scope, Time-bound target. Every recommendation should name what, who, when, and how success will be measured.

Essay-style writing in a report format

The mistake: The report contains long blocks of continuous prose where tables, bullet points, or subheadings should be used. The professional audience cannot scan the document efficiently.

The fix: Reports are designed for scanning, not linear reading. Use numbered headings, bullet points for lists, and tables for comparative data. Reserve prose paragraphs for analysis and argument.

R12. Report Writing FAQs

Q1. Does the executive summary count toward the word count?

In most Australian university report assessments, the executive summary is excluded from the word count. However, this varies by unit — always check your unit outline. The reference list, title page, table of contents, and appendices are also typically excluded.

Q2. Should I write the report in first or third person?

Academic reports are typically written in third person ('the analysis indicates', 'this report recommends'). Some business school and MBA programs permit or require first person in recommendations ('We recommend'). Check your unit outline and follow the specified convention consistently.

Q3. How many recommendations should I include?

Between 3 and 6 well-developed, SMART recommendations is typical for most academic business reports. Too few suggests insufficient analysis; too many suggests a lack of prioritisation. Quality and specificity matter more than quantity.

Q4. Can I use bullet points throughout the report body?

Yes — unlike essays, reports permit bullet points in the body. Use them for lists of items, key findings summaries, and recommendations. However, avoid replacing analytical paragraphs entirely with bullet points. Analysis and argument should be written in prose; lists should be reserved for genuinely list-appropriate content.

Q5. What is the difference between conclusions and recommendations?

Conclusions are what the analysis demonstrates — they answer the report's central question based on the evidence. Recommendations are what should be done in response to what the conclusions establish. Conclusions are analytical; recommendations are prescriptive. They should be in separate sections and should be logically connected — each recommendation should follow from a specific conclusion.

Q6. How do I structure the findings section if I have both primary and secondary data?

Organise by analytical theme, not by data source. Under each thematic subheading, draw on both primary and secondary data to build the analysis. Separating 'literature findings' from 'survey findings' fragments the analysis — the integrated approach demonstrates higher-order analytical thinking and produces a more coherent argument.

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Service	How It Helps
Essay Writing Coaching	Thesis development, PEEL paragraph structure, critical analysis depth, introduction and conclusion writing — the specific skills that move students from Credit to Distinction and from Distinction to HD
Report Writing Coaching	Executive summary writing, findings and analysis integration, SMART recommendation development, professional formatting
Assessment Feedback Review	Translates marker comments ('lacks analysis', 'vague recommendations') into specific, actionable improvement steps for the next submission
Assignment Planning	Decodes the brief, develops the argument plan or report structure before writing begins — preventing the structural problems that reduce marks
Postgraduate Research Support	Literature review structure, research methodology, dissertation chapter planning

All services are delivered online — accessible from anywhere in Australia. Visit assignprosolution.com to explore available tutoring and writing coaching options.

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