



OASIS RESEARCH WRITING

Research Writing Series

Seven Things Every Research Report Should Include

A Practical Guide for Researchers, Analysts, and Institutions

Introduction

A research report is judged less by the depth of the work behind it than by how clearly that work is presented. A reader deciding whether to trust a report's conclusions rarely reconstructs the entire research process instead, they look for a small set of structural signals that the work was done properly.

Those signals are consistent across disciplines. Whether the report addresses law, policy, market analysis, or academic inquiry, the same seven elements separate a report that can be relied upon from one that cannot. This guide sets out what they are, why each matters, and how to build them into a report from the outset.

The Seven Essential Elements

1. A Clearly Defined Research Question

Every credible report opens with a precise statement of what it set out to answer. A vague or overly broad question signals unfocused research; a precise one tells the reader exactly what the findings can, and cannot, be used for.

Example: Not "trends in remote work," but "what proportion of mid-sized firms in the sector adopted permanent remote policies between 2023 and 2026, and why."

2. A Stated Methodology

The report should explain how information was gathered and evaluated which sources were used, what time period was covered, and what approach was taken to verify findings. This allows another researcher to retrace the work and test its conclusions.

Example: A one-paragraph methodology note stating that findings draw on primary regulatory filings, cross-checked against two independent industry datasets.

3. An Executive Summary

A short summary at the front of the report gives a busy reader the core findings before they commit to reading further. It should state the main conclusion, not merely describe the topic.

Example: A five-sentence summary stating the headline finding, its confidence level, and its principal implication for the reader.

4. Evidence Traceable to Primary Sources

Every material claim should be traceable to an original, citable source a statute, a dataset, a filed document, a peer-reviewed study rather than a second-hand summary. This is what allows a reader to verify the report independently.

Example: A cited government dataset with its publication date, rather than a news article that merely references the same figures.

5. Acknowledged Limitations

A credible report states what it does not know, or could not verify, as plainly as what it found. Omitting limitations does not make a report stronger; it makes it less trustworthy once a reader discovers the gap independently.

Example: A note that the sample excluded firms below a certain size, and that findings may not generalise to smaller organisations.

6. A Reasoned Conclusion

The conclusion should follow visibly from the evidence presented earlier in the report, not introduce new claims or shift in tone toward advocacy. A reader should be able to trace each part of the conclusion back to a specific finding.

Example: A conclusion that explicitly references the three findings that support it, rather than a general closing statement.

7. Consistent Formatting and Citation

Uniform headings, consistent citation style, and clean structural formatting are not cosmetic. They are what allow a reader to navigate the report quickly and trust that the same rigour applied to its content applied to its assembly.

Example: One citation style used throughout, with page numbers and a clear heading hierarchy from start to finish.

What Their Presence or Absence Signals

Element	If Present	If Absent
Research Question	Scope is clear and testable	Findings feel unfocused or unanchored



Element	If Present	If Absent
Methodology	Work can be verified and retraced	Reader must simply trust the author
Executive Summary	Findings are accessible quickly	Reader must read the full report to find the answer
Traceable Evidence	Claims can be independently checked	Claims cannot be verified
Limitations	Reader can judge the findings' scope fairly	Overconfidence is likely, and gaps surface later
Reasoned Conclusion	Conclusion is defensible under questioning	Conclusion feels asserted rather than earned
Consistent Formatting	Report reads as professionally assembled	Report reads as rushed, regardless of content quality

A reader rarely checks all of a report's research. They check whether it looks like the kind of report that could survive being checked.

Common Mistakes

- **Burying the conclusion** placing the main finding only at the very end, forcing the reader to read the entire report to find it.
- **Overstating certainty** presenting a tentative finding with unqualified confidence, without noting the limitations behind it.
- **Undocumented methodology** providing conclusions without ever stating how they were reached.
- **Inconsistent citation** mixing citation styles or omitting sources for material claims.
- **A restated topic instead of a conclusion** ending with a summary of the subject rather than an answer to the original question.

Frequently Asked Questions

Does every report need a formal methodology section?

Not always as a separate heading, but the reader should always be able to tell how the findings were reached, even if it is folded into the introduction.

How long should the executive summary be?

Short enough to be read in under a minute typically three to six sentences stating the finding, its confidence, and its implication.

Is it acceptable to state that a question could not be fully answered?



Yes. An honest statement of an unresolved question is more credible than a forced conclusion the evidence does not fully support.

Should limitations be placed near the beginning or the end of a report?

Either can work, but they should never be omitted or hidden in a footnote; a dedicated, visible mention is standard practice.

What is the most commonly missing element in weak reports?

Traceable evidence. Many reports state findings confidently without allowing a reader to verify the underlying source.

Research Report Checklist

- ☐ The research question is stated clearly at the outset.
- ☐ The methodology explains how information was gathered and verified.
- ☐ An executive summary states the finding, not just the topic.
- ☐ Every material claim traces to a primary, citable source.
- ☐ Limitations are disclosed plainly, not hidden or omitted.
- ☐ The conclusion follows visibly from the evidence presented.
- ☐ Formatting and citation style are consistent throughout.

Conclusion

These seven elements are not decoration; they are what allow a reader to trust a report without redoing the work themselves. A report that includes all seven earns its reader's confidence structurally, not through the strength of its language alone and that structural trust is what makes research worth acting on.