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ENGL 365 – Technical Writing

Secs. 007, 008, 011, 012

16 January 2024 (updated 1 May 2025)

Formal Report (FR)

**Using a blend of both primary and secondary research, write a formal report that studies a research question in either a comparative, causal, or feasibility analysis genre format. The primary research component for this assignment requires the collaboration of research participants, ideally in a face-to-face format or alternatively through digital means of communication. Given the reliance upon cooperation to complete this project, it will consist of three (3) stages: 1. a proposal post on the Moodle discussion forum, 2. a rough draft of the report, and 3. a final draft of the report.**

Starting with a research question

All formal reports attempt to answer a research question. Research questions cannot deal with objective and established facts (such as “how many franchises are in the National Football League currently?”). An example of a research question is “Are there social bonding benefits to attending UL Lafayette athletic events as a student spectator?”.

All research questions should be based on subjective criteria and open to interpretation. A research question should generally not have a numerical answer. This means that the answer to your research question will inevitably be contingent on the quality of your data. This assignment is not about settling the matter of a given topic once and for all but rather about exploring a topic through different types of research to provide a potential answer to the question. This project should ideally be a springboard for more research concerning the same subject by other researchers or even by yourself at a later stage of your research career.

The research question for this assignment must be scaled appropriately for the deadlines of the assignment. That is, the research must be completed in time for the writer to be able to finish composing the report. The amount of time needed to analyze the data within the report will depend on the writer’s work ethic and comfort level with professional writing.

Formal report genres

Note that writers/researchers must choose just one (1) of these genres.

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| --- | --- | --- |
| TYPE | QUESTION | NOTES |
| Comparative Analysis | Should we do X instead of Y? | * Discussion of criteria behind each choice is essential * Address why you prioritize some criteria over others |
| Causal Analysis | Did X cause Y? | * Be careful to note the possibility of faulty causal reasoning (correlation does not equal causation) * Ideally consider alternative theories besides the one you are positing that caused the action or effect or state of affairs, etc. |
| Feasibility Analysis | Can X be done? | * Feasibility always depends on changing an institution and its culture through policy which can take time * Feasibility must take into consideration time and budget * Writer/researcher usually cannot approve of the plan but present whether it is feasible to the reader (who has the power to approve or disapprove of it) |

Participant sample size

Ideally in a research project such as this you would want to have as large a sample size as is possible. However, given the time and labor constraints of this project, it is acceptable if your sample size for surveys is small (less than 100). Survey data is considered statistically significant if there are at least 100 respondents. Reaching the 100 respondent threshold for questionnaires is not a requirement for completing this assignment or for receiving a passing grade. Survey size will be considered by the instructor along with various other criteria in terms of grading the formal report.

There is no threshold for sample size for research methods like social media, participant observation, and interviewing. Projects that combine more than one primary research method will not be as dependent on getting as many participants in order to yield relevant conclusions. When using a primary research method other than surveying, it is often useful to get data from different types of people (such as university administrators, faculty, and students).

In representing the number of participants in your research, the standard is to use the letter n, so n=26 means that you surveyed 26 people. This standard is most common for surveys but can be used for any primary research method(s).

Extra credit

As part of the extra credit assignment for the semester, students will get one (1) point for each formal report they contributed to. Students may participate in up to five (5) projects so that they may boost their overall course grade by up to five (5) percentage points (as was stated on the syllabus).

To confirm their participation in another student’s research project, students will need to upload screenshots or scanned copies of questionnaires, interview transcripts, etc. to the final draft submission space for extra credit on the course Moodle page.

Participant recruitment

All students will have access to the email addresses of every student in ENGL 365 Secs. 007, 008, 011, and 012 (87 students total). However, a researcher cannot expect that every student will respond to his or her request for questionnaire participation. The instructor may, time permitting, assist students in participating in their student research projects through filling out questionnaires or alternatively in whatever manner the researcher requests.

There will be a dedicated Moodle forum for posting researcher questionnaires with the aim of participant recruitment.

Because recruitment in a survey study is always voluntary, it is important for researchers to use their existing resources for finding data, such as by surveying or interviewing friends and family in addition to other undergraduates. Since most students will not approach the minimum threshold of 100 that is considered statistically significant, it would be better to have a varied but small sample size of people (not all of them undergraduates) as compared to a uniform but small sample size composed of just undergraduates.

The instructor will hand out paper copies of questionnaires in class but he will not print the questionnaire copies himself. Furthermore, the instructor will not be able to answer questions about any questionnaire that he hands out because he is not the researcher in the given project. This reiterates how important it is that you design questionnaires that can be clearly read and understood, since, as a researcher, you cannot guarantee that you will be around to answer any questions about the questionnaire to prospective participants.

In terms of using questionnaire websites, the instructor recommends *Google Forms* (<https://www.google.com/forms/about/>) and *SurveyMonkey* (<https://www.surveymonkey.com>) and these websites will be discussed in class. Both websites require prior registration with an email address (*Google Forms* requires using a Google account). *SurveyMonkey* has more features than *Google Forms*, but the latter is a little easier to use. Most of the *SurveyMonkey* features are not available in the free version and the free version limits survey responses to 25 respondents. *Google Forms* is completely free. It is recommended to only use *SurveyMonkey* if the student wishes to pay for the “Advantage” version. If not, then *Google Forms* is the better option.

When using *Google Forms*, it is important to not check the “Include form in email” option on the “Send” screen (when you have completed your questionnaire and are ready to send it to your participants). When participants fill out the questionnaire in their email sometimes Google does not save the data, but this does not seem to happen when participants must click on the link to the questionnaire from an email message. In other words, aim for your research participants to have to visit the link for your *Google Forms* questionnaire to make sure that the website saves their data.

Surveying your workplace

If a researcher decides to survey or interview or perform a participant observation of their own co-workers then it is essential that they state to the research participants that the project is a school project and not a work project. This is also true if the researcher uses customers from their job as participants in their study. Participants need to know what they are consenting to in participating in research and they need to know that not participating will not affect the job security of the researcher or the participant.

Primary research methods

Note that formal reports need not use just one of these research methods.

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| --- | --- | --- |
| TYPE | DESCRIPTION | NOTES |
| Interview | Guided question and answer session with a human interlocutor about a specific topic | * Keep the interviewee “on track” in answering your questions * Send interviewee questions before session * Record session (with the consent of the interviewee) * Note observations and tone promptly after session * Voxpop or semi-anonymous interviews |
| Survey | Written or digital document (questionnaire) that asks respondents to select answer choices or fill in answer choices about a specific topic | * Lack of clarity impacts quality data * Encourage respondents to use their own words * Choice of anonymity * Including respondent demographic details (age, sex, major, etc.) according to research question |
| Participant observation | Recording observations of a person completing a task as you watch the task happen in real time | * Large scale ethnography * Awareness of researcher as outsider * Tribes are not just “primitive” but also modern and urban (subcultures) |
| Social media | Posting content on social media sites about a specific topic a means of collecting response data from social media users | * Distinct from found data * Privacy and identity concerns |

Observation bias

This is an issue with ethnographies or research projects using the method of participant observation. A researcher is never certain that his or her presence as an outsider within a group will not affect the data yielded from observing the group. In other words, a group of people may alter their behavior to make themselves appear more interesting when they are observed by an outside researcher.

One way to mitigate the effects of observation bias is to, as a researcher, identify what parts of the data concern insider knowledge (that the researcher knows about) and what parts of the data concern outsider knowledge (from the point of view of the researcher). In folklore and anthropology, emic knowledge comes from the researcher being affiliated (prior to the research) with the group being studied in an ethnography, while etic knowledge comes from the researcher studying a group that they themselves are not part of. Of course, how much data is familiar to the researcher and how much is not will depend on the researcher’s background and choice of research question and research subjects.

This assignment does not require that researchers cancel out the possibility of observation bias, since doing so can only happen through replication of the data by another researcher in a later study. However, it is good practice for researchers to note the potential for observation bias and to identify the parts of the data that are most susceptible to this bias. Doing so is helpful for future researchers who may want to replicate the researcher’s study and avoid making the same mistakes.

Hiding the hypothesis

While it is natural to have an expectation of the answer to your research question before you conduct research, it is essential that you do not disclose your expected answer (or hypothesis) to your research participants.

Revealing your hypothesis to your research participants may cause them to answer your questions in a way that is favorable to your research agenda. This is called participant bias. In other words, if your participants know what you think your research will show, they will likely act in such a way as to agree with you because disagreement can be awkward. However, if your participants are agreeing with you just to be polite or to avoid awkwardness then the data from your participants cannot be trusted as valid; as representing their authentic values or beliefs.

When you ask someone to participate in primary research, the person should have a clear idea of what they are expected to do and how the data they provide relates to the research question. Research participants should *not* know what the researcher’s expected answer to the research question is, but they should presume that the researcher is interested in answering his or her own research question.

Secondary research methods

Secondary research in an academic context refers to analysis of existing literature (this word does not just refer to artistic or culturally important works) concerning the topic.

Research topics are never necessarily new or fresh but are instead recycled on the basis of existing knowledge and existing research. The reception of existing research can inspire the audience to correct or improve it by replicating the existing study with a new population of research participants, or else designing a new study that avoids the problems and limitations of the existing one.

Always try to find scholarly sources that discuss your research question, even if in an analogous way. For example, the research question of “What do New Zealanders (or Kiwis) think about wearing athleisure clothes to the office?” could use existing research that studies the same question but from the point of view of Australians instead. Given the cultural links between these two nations, the data from Australians is worth comparing to the data (to be collected) from New Zealanders or Kiwis, especially if the two studies occurred at around the same time.

Your document should engage with at least three (3) scholarly sources related to your research question. In addressing these sources researchers should identify how these previous studies are relevant to his or her research question. In addition, researchers should critique the usefulness of these previous studies by analyzing their strengths and weaknesses (every research study has weaknesses).

Research ethics and anonymity

Depending on the research question a researcher may ask participants to reveal vulnerabilities or even confidential bits of information about themselves. To protect research participants, it is essential that researchers give participants the option to participate anonymously in the research. When participants participate anonymously it is common practice to designate them each with individual pseudonyms. The use of pseudonyms allows the researcher to avoid redundancy in discussing the results of the study. Whether the researcher or the participant provides the pseudonym, be certain that it does not inadvertently identify the participant (such as by using a well-known nickname as a pseudonym for a research participant).

Participants also have the right to withdraw from the research at any stage prior to the turning in of the final draft of the report. This means that researchers should not rely too much upon one participant.

The ethics of deception

While lying or even withholding certain information is considered dishonest, depending on the research such tactics can be ethical but *only if* deception is required for the drawing of relevant data to address the research question.

For example, focus groups often rely on deception by telling the participants that there is nobody on the other side of the two-way mirror in the focus group observation room. However, often in focus groups the creators of the text being discussed by the focus group participants (such as a TV show) are often on the other side of the glass, meaning that the creators can see the participants, but the participants cannot see the creators. If the participants knew they were being observed, then they would likely be reticent about revealing their honest opinions about the text.

When using deception in research it is essential to debrief research participants when you’re finished with them as a researcher. It is not unethical to omit the truth in order to get honest data, but it is unethical to allow participants to leave the research setting (wherever it may be, online or face to face) without knowing the truth.

If researchers decide to use deception it is essential that they debrief participants about what they omitted in conducting the research and why they had to do so.

Required parts

The formal report consists of three parts: the front matter, the text of the report, and the end matter.

Please follow the following format in your report, so that the Letter of Transmittal should be page 1 and the last pages of the report should end with the Appendix.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| NAME | DESCRIPTION | SECTION |
| Letter of transmittal | * Letter addressed to the instructor by the writer/researcher * Letter should include the instructor’s work address and the writer’s home address (anonymous addresses are acceptable) * Discuss the overall aim and purpose of the project * Acknowledge people who helped you write the document such as research participants | Front matter |
| Title Page | * Include title of report, instructor name, student name, course name | Front matter |
| Table of Contents | * Include letter of transmittal and title page | Front matter |
| List of tables and figures | * All survey data should be represented in table (or chart) format * Mention at least 3 images | Front matter |
| Abstract | * A short (250 words) summary of the research project * Include keywords relevant to the research | Front matter |
| Introduction/Background | * Discuss why the research question is important * Address and critique previous research about the research question (secondary research) | Text of the report |
| Body | * Discuss primary research data as evidence * Rationalize your choice of research methodology (or methodologies) * Critique research and discuss how it can be useful (or not) in addressing the research question | Text of the report |
| Conclusion | * Address shortcomings and limitations in your approach to the research question (your methodology) * Consider what should be done next to resolve the research question | Text of the report |
| References/Works Cited | * Should be in MLA (Works Cited) or APA (References) format | End matter |
| Glossary (Optional) | * Only necessary if research question involves addressing certain terms of art or words (at least 5) specific to a given field (remember that the reader is a college educated person but not necessarily an expert in your field) * Define each term the way you will use it throughout the report | End matter |
| Appendix | * Paper trail of all your research (interview notes, written transcripts of interviews, copies or digital scans of blank and filled out questionnaires) * Optional: attach video or audio files | End matter |

Style

Researchers should use active tense in composing the formal report. It is acceptable to use active tense even when referring to previous studies used as secondary research sources. Except in cases where the writer refers to two distinct actions in the past, one more remote and one more recent, passive voice should be avoided (but passive voice is appropriate for referring to the more remote past action).

Usability

Each formal report should have a minimum of three (3) images either of your own composition or taken from elsewhere. All images should be cited, and each should have its own caption. The writer’s choice of images should reflect his or her research question and topic. The images should be placed in the introduction/background or body sections of the document.

You can also emphasize usability by using smaller paragraphs and subheadings, as well as different color font, within the body section of the report.

Length requirement

The document should be 2500 to 3000 words or roughly 10-12 pages of double-spaced text. There is no maximum word limit for this assignment.

Citation

All images, questionnaires, and interviews should be cited according to either MLA or APA format both in-text and in the works cited or references section.

Due dates

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| SECTION | PROPOSAL POST | ROUGH DRAFT | FINAL DRAFT |
| 007 | 5 March 2025 | 28 April 2025 | 30 April 2025 |
| 008 | 5 March 2025 | 28 April 2025 | 30 April 2025 |
| 011 | 4 March 2025 | 4 May 2025 | 4 May 2025 |
| 012 | 4 March 2025 | 4 May 2025 | 4 May 2025 |

The Moodle forum post proposal asks researchers to identify their research question and methods and (if possible) any secondary sources they plan on using.

Students should bring print or digital copies of their work to class for peer review, as stated in the syllabus. The final draft should be submitted to Moodle as a .pdf (ideal), .doc or .docx file. Students may opt to upload audio or video files of interviews (or participant observation) if they wish, however this is not required.