Preparing a Research Report

A research experience provides undergraduates a problem-solving activity unlike anything else in the curriculum. It provides exposure to research methodology and an opportunity to work closely with a faculty advisor. It usually requires the use of advanced concepts, a variety of experimental techniques, and state-of-the-art instrumentation. Ideally, undergraduate research should focus on a well-defined project that stands a reasonable chance of completion in the time available. A literature survey alone is not a satisfactory research project. Neither is repetition of established procedures. The Committee on Professional Training (CPT) strongly supports efforts by departments to establish active and vibrant undergraduate research programs, recognizing the role that research can play in developing a wide range of student skills. The 2015 guidelines allow for the use of undergraduate research both as in-depth coursework, as well as a means of meeting 180 of the 400 laboratory hours required for certification ***provided that*** a well-written, comprehensive, and well-documented research report is prepared at the end of a project (samples of such research reports must be submitted with the periodic reports.) The CPT has a separate supplement outlining the components of successful research programs and projects.

Preparation of a comprehensive, well-documented and appropriately referenced written research report is an essential part of a valid research experience, and the student should be aware of this requirement at the outset of the project. Interim reports may also be required, usually at the termination of the quarter or semester. Sufficient time should be allowed for satisfactory completion of reports, taking into account that initial drafts should be critiqued by the faculty advisor and corrected by the student at each stage. It may be expected that concrete outcomes of any research project would be student presentation of research results at a professional meeting and/or co-authorship on a journal publication. While desirable outcomes, they are not a substitute for a well-written comprehensive report that demonstrates that the student has a full grasp of the scope of the problem, the techniques/instrumental methods used, and the ramifications of the results generated (much as might be expected for a capstone paper or a B.S. thesis). The student report should receive substantive critique and correction by the faculty mentor in its development.

Guidelines on how to prepare a professional-style research report are not always routinely available. For this reason, the following information on report writing and format is provided to be helpful to undergraduate researchers and to faculty advisors. Much of what follows is similar to what authors would find in many ‘guidelines to authors’ instructions for most journal submissions.

The most comprehensive student research reports examined by CPT have been those student reports reviewed by more faculty than just the supervising research advisor. In some cases, programs require an approval of the report by several faculty members; in such cases, student research reports are often of high quality.

Organization of the Research Report

Most scientific research reports, irrespective of the field, parallel the method of scientific reasoning. That is: the problem is defined, a hypothesis is created, experiments are devised to test the hypothesis, experiments are conducted, and conclusions are drawn. The exact format of scientific reports is often discipline dependent with variations in order and content. The student is encouraged to adopt the format that is most appropriate to the discipline of the research. Many journals offer a formatting template to aid the author. One example of such a framework is as follows:

- Title
- Abstract
- Introduction
- Experimental Details or Theoretical Analysis
- Results
- Discussion
- Conclusions and Summary
- References

Title and Title Page

The title should reflect the content and emphasis of the project described in the report. It should be as short as possible and include essential key words.

The author's name (e.g., Mary B. Chung) should follow the title on a separate line, followed by the author's affiliation (e.g., Department of Chemistry, Central State College, Central, AR 76123), the date, and possibly the origin of the report (e.g., In partial fulfillment of a Senior Thesis Project under the supervision of Professor Danielle F. Green, June, 1997).

All of the above could appear on a single cover page. Acknowledgments and a table of contents can be added as preface pages if desired.

Abstract

The abstract should concisely describe the topic, the scope, the principal findings, and the conclusions. It should be written last to accurately reflect the content of the report. The length of abstracts varies but seldom exceeds 200 words.

A primary objective of an abstract is to communicate to the reader the essence of the paper. It should provide sufficient information to describe the important features of the project in the absence of the rest of the document. The reader will then be the judge of whether to read the full report or not. Were the report to appear in the primary literature, the abstract would serve as a key source of indexing terms and key words to be used in information retrieval. Author abstracts are often published verbatim in Chemical Abstracts.

Introduction

"A good introduction is a clear statement of the problem or project and the reasons for studying it." (The ACS Style Guide. American Chemical Society, Washington, DC, 2006.)

The nature of the problem and why it is of interest should be conveyed in the opening paragraphs. This section should describe clearly but briefly the background information on the problem, what has been done before (with proper literature citations), and the objectives of the current project. A clear relationship between the current project and the scope and limitations of earlier work should be made so that the reasons for the project and the approach used will be understood.

Experimental Details, Computation Procedures, or Theoretical Analysis

This section should describe what was actually done. It is a succinct exposition of the laboratory and computational details, describing procedures, techniques, instrumentation, special precautions, characterization of compounds and so on. It should be sufficiently detailed that other experienced researchers would be able to repeat the work and obtain comparable results.

In theoretical reports, this section would include sufficient theoretical or mathematical analysis to enable derivations and numerical results to be checked. Computer programs from the public domain should be cited. New computer programs should be described in outline form.

If the experimental section is lengthy and detailed, as in synthetic work, it can be placed at the end of the report so that it does not interrupt the conceptual flow of the report. Its placement will depend on the nature of the project and the discretion of the writer.

Results

In this section, relevant data, observations, and findings are summarized. Tabulation of data, equations, charts, and figures can be used effectively to present results clearly and concisely. Schemes to show reaction sequences may be used here or elsewhere in the report.

Discussion

The crux of the report is the analysis and interpretation of the results. What do the results mean? How do they relate to the objectives of the project? To what extent have they resolved the problem? Because the "Results" and "Discussion" sections are interrelated, they can often be combined as one section.

Conclusions and Summary

A separate section outlining the main conclusions of the project is appropriate if conclusions have not already been stated in the "Discussion" section. Directions for future work are also suitably expressed here.

A lengthy report, or one in which the findings are complex, usually benefits from a paragraph summarizing the main features of the report - the objectives, the findings, and the conclusions.

The last paragraph of text in manuscripts prepared for publication is customarily dedicated to acknowledgments. However, there is no rule about this, and research reports or senior theses frequently place acknowledgments following the title page.

References

Thorough, up-to-date literature references acknowledge foundational work, direct the reader to published procedures, results, and interpretations, and play a critical role in establishing the overall scholarship of the report. The report should include in-text citations with the citations collated at the end of the report and formatted as described in The ACS Style Guide or using a standard established by an appropriate journal. The citation process can be facilitated by using one of several available citation software programs. In a well-documented report, the majority of the references should come from the primary chemical literature. Because Internet sources are not archival records, they are generally inappropriate as references for scholarly work. They should be kept to a bare minimum.

Preparing the Manuscript

The personal computer and word processing have made manuscript preparation and revision a great deal easier than it used to be. It is assumed that students will have access to word processing and to additional software that allows spelling to be checked, numerical data to be graphed, chemical structures to be drawn, and mathematical equations to be represented. These are essential tools of the technical writer. All manuscripts should be carefully proofread before being submitted. Preliminary drafts should be edited by the faculty advisor (and/or a supervising committee) before the report is presented in final form.

Useful Texts

Writing the Laboratory Notebook, Kanare, H.M., American Chemical Society, Washington, DC, 1985.

This book describes among other things the reasons for note keeping, organizing and writing the notebook with examples, and provides photographs from laboratory notebooks of famous scientists.

ACS Style Guide: Effective Communication of Scientific Information, Coghill, A.M., Garson, L.R.; 3rd Edition, American Chemical Society, Washington, DC, 2006.

This volume is an invaluable writer's handbook in the field of chemistry. It contains a wealth of data on preparing any type of scientific report and is useful for both students and professional chemists. Every research laboratory should have a copy. It gives pointers on the organization of a scientific paper, correct grammar and style, and accepted formats in citing chemical names, chemical symbols, units, and references.

There are useful suggestions on constructing tables, preparing illustrations, using different fonts, and giving oral presentations. In addition, there is a brief overview of the chemical literature, the way in which it is organized and how information is disseminated and retrieved. A selected bibliography of other excellent guides and resources to technical writing is also provided. See also The Basics of Technical Communicating. Cain, B.E.; ACS Professional Reference Book American Chemical Society: Washington, DC, 1988.

Write Like a Chemist, Robinson, M.S., Stoller, F.L., Costanza-Robinson, M.S., Jones, J.K., Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2008.

This book addresses all aspects of scientific writing. The book provides a structured approach to writing a journal article, conference abstract, scientific poster and research proposal. The approach is designed to turn the complex process of writing into graduated, achievable tasks.

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