

Before you start

What makes a final report look terrible?

First impressions really are important with coursework. You not only want your work to be brilliantly easy to read and navigate (by using report-writing style), but it should look the business and make the marker be impressed just by looking at it! The simplest way you can ensure this happens is to use a template. There is nothing worse than a report of 50 pages that uses 5 different font styles and 10 different font sizes, different layouts for paragraphs on different pages, with headings that are sometimes in colour and sometimes in black, that are sometimes underlined and sometimes not, with page margins that are different on different pages, with spacing out between sections of writing different on different pages and so on. If you pick up any book and flick through a few pages, it will look brilliant because there is a consistent style from each page to the next one.

Spend 15 minutes thinking about and setting up a standard template, with some dummy headings, sub-headings and text, laid out exactly as you would like it. Decide in advance:

what font will you use?

what will headings and sub-headings look like?

will all headings be underlined and in bold or just in bold?

will lists be indented? If so my how much, and how much space above and below the list?

what margins will exist around each page?

how will diagrams appear - centered, with a title, where should the title be relative to the diagram?

what spacing will you use after each heading and sub heading?

what spacing will you use between sections of text?

and so on.

Once you have a standard template with some dummy headings, sub-headings, text, lists, diagrams etc then save it. Each time you need to write something for your report, open your template, save it immediately using SAVE AS with a file name that also includes the date and use it. This simple task will ensure your report looks wonderful when it is finished and time to print everything off. You will need to remind yourself to use it regularly as it is easy to slip into bad habits and forget to use it!

Always write your projects in report writing style

You should write your projects using report writing style, which is different to how you would write an essay for English or History, for example. This is a style that allows you to keep the amount of writing down and allows a reader to quickly skim-read the report and find what they want. There are no universal rules about what this style is but if you follow the rules below and note any additional comments from your teachers and from the Internet, your project will look fabulous. The key is consistency throughout your work, and the key to consistency is the use of templates (see above).

1.

1. Every section should have a **section heading**.
2. Every paragraph or sub-section should have a **sub-heading**.
3. Use a **formal** font and style for the headings and body text e.g. Arial size 12 for headings (bold and underlined), Arial size 10 (bold) for sub-headings and Arial

size 10 for normal text. Do not use a mixture of fonts and styles - your report will end up looking a mess.

4. **Do not use colour** unless there is a very clear reason for using it e.g. to help clarify a diagram, and then do not use more than 3 colours ever. Avoid colour printouts. It is a waste of ink and will not get you any more marks. This is a formal (boring-looking and professional-looking) report you are doing!
5. Decide at the beginning of your project what font and style you will use for the headings, sub-headings and body text and then use them always, for every page in the report. **Always use templates!**
6. Every sub-section should be separated from the next sub-heading by a **line space**.
7. **Never indent the first line of a new paragraph or sentence**. You do not do this in reports although you do for many other styles of writing. The only things that should be indented are lists.
8. **DO NOT WRITE IN PARAGRAPHS**. Get into the habit of writing a sub-section heading, followed by one or two sentences and then an indented list. If your report ends up as 50 pages of lists and just 1 or 2 paragraphs then you have done the right thing!
9. Every diagram must have a **heading** underneath it that says "Here is a diagram of ... It shows you"
10. Sentences should **not exceed 25 words**. If they do, split them into two sentences.
11. Write in clear English. Any jargon used should be explained, possibly by referring the reader to a **Glossary**. Use a spellchecker, always. Persuade someone to proof-read your work. Parents are ideal because they usually won't know anything about what you are doing and will only concentrate on whether what you have written is clear and makes sense.
12. **Separate major sections** of your report. Have a page that says e.g. SECTION C - SOFTWARE DEVELOPMENT AND TESTING and nothing else.
13. For this A Level project, don't use an **Appendix**. Put any information you collect in the main report.
14. Make sure you can **hole-punch neatly**. If you can't hole-punch pages so that they all line up, ask your teacher to show you how!!!
15. Hole punch landscape pages the correct way around. Landscaped pages should be hole-punched so that they **face out** from the spine of the report, not so that they face into the spine.

Organisation, back-ups and version control

You are going to spend a lot of time on your coursework! Get organised! Set up folders and sub-folders for the project, organised like the mark scheme. Save your work regularly. Back up your work onto a pen drive every 30 minutes but remember, a pen drive is a back-up device. You should always have a copy of the main folders and files somewhere else. I have taught many

students over the years who store their entire project on a pen drive, and then they lost it or it failed on them! A pen drive should only ever hold a second copy of all of your work.

Always include the date in the file name. If you are working on a document over many days or weeks, then open it up and re-save it immediately with the date in the file name. For example:

Evaluation 21/09/15

Evaluation 22/09/15

Evaluation 26/09/15

Evaluation 30/09/15

Then save it every 30 minutes you are working on it. This is called 'version control' and this simple organisational technique will enable you to find anything you did in the past easily, as well as providing you with a number of back-ups. This is doubly important if you are working on the same document from different computers. You need to know the order that the versions of the document were created in. Using the date in EVERY file you create is the best way of doing this.

Prototype your proposed project

Before you decide what project to do, design and set-up a very simple prototype of it, with the essential features. For example, if you are going to have an adventure game, can you actually put together a much simplified one over a weekend, with just two characters, with their data, having a fight and storing the results in a data structure? This will help reassure you that the project you intend to do with 30 different characters is realistic, because it essentially involves just scaling up what you have already done and adding a few bells and whistles. This can be also provide you with some evidence for section 4

Research

Section 2 involves researching similar projects and solutions. If you can't find any, how does that affect your marks? Your teacher will advise you, but one thing you might do before finally selecting your project is to make sure you can find similar open source projects so that you can get ideas, examine the code, see the data structures they used and so on. Selecting the project wisely, by thinking about what you need to do to get high marks before you actually make a final decision on what project to choose is a sure-fire recipe for success! Don't rush into something that is too complex, too big so it takes up all your time, or too obscure, so you can't find what you need to get the highest marks for the project.