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Report Writing Guidance

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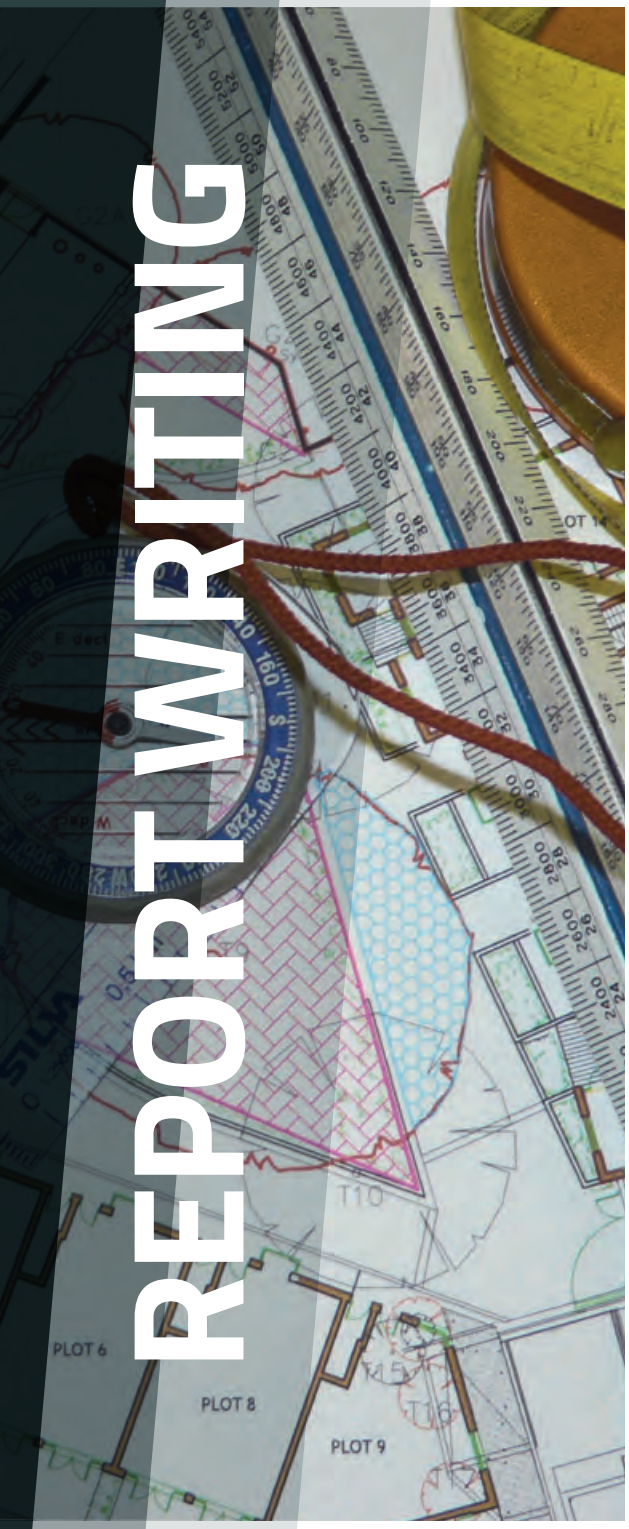

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The Arboricultural Association
The Home of Arboriculture

www.**trees**.org.uk

Foreword

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For more than five decades the Arboricultural Association (AA) has been working with arborists to establish and improve the arboricultural industry. It has become the UK's largest professional home for arborists from every background: tree surgeons (contractors), local government tree managers, tree advisors (consultants), tree growers, those in training and education and anyone else involved in arboriculture.

This guidance document has been developed to assist those working in the field of arboriculture to construct and present written reports to a professional standard. For those who aspire to become a Registered Consultant with the Association, the guidance sets out the principles and minimum standards expected at that level.

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Introduction and the Arboricultural Association's Registered Consultant Scheme

1. Introduction

1.1 Anyone advising clients should expect to be called on for a written account of that advice – a report. It may be produced in a variety of forms, e.g., a letter, a structured bound report or a proof of evidence. Whatever the form and whoever the author (tree officer, contractor or consultant), there are skills that must be applied to ensure the output is fit for purpose, intelligible to the reader and defensible by the author.

1.2 The wording of a letter (or even an email) will require care and thought to make sure that the message is clear, complete and concise. A formal report or proof of evidence will be governed by a logical structure of headed sections and will provide more opportunity to discuss and explain data and reasoning. In either case, recognising what to say, how to say it and when to stop are crucial skills!

1.3 Report writing does not come naturally to all of us; guidance and practice will help you to develop and hone that skill. Getting help from a colleague or an independent mentor will be invaluable, particularly if they read and give feedback on draft reports. These notes identify some of the issues that you should consider when drafting reports to help create a robust product.

2. The Arboricultural Association's Registered Consultant Scheme

2.1 Ultimately, as someone who has an appropriate level of knowledge and experience and advises clients on arboricultural matters in the most complex and demanding situations, you can apply to become an Arboricultural Association Registered Consultant (AARC). Applicants to this scheme are expected "to demonstrate clear and logical thought processes, with the ability to impart their knowledge and opinions, both verbally and in written reports, in a dispassionate and objective manner".[1]

2.2 These notes will help aspiring applicants to the scheme review their skills in presenting information and opinion in a written form. Applicants are required to submit a portfolio of reports which are assessed to confirm that the expected standards have been met.

2.3 The aims and objectives of the assessment are:

a) To assess the applicant to the required standards of the AARC scheme as set out in Appendices A and B of the *AARC Application Guide*.

b) For the assessment, whatever the outcome, to provide guidance to the applicant for further development and improvement of their skills.

c) To ensure that a successful applicant is aware of his or her responsibilities in terms of:

i) an understanding of and adherence to the AA's *Code of Conduct and Ethics*;

ii) a more general understanding of professional behaviour in other fields;

iii) an understanding of trees and the law, including the duties and responsibilities of an expert witness;

iv) an understanding of client expectations, compliance with insurers' terms and conditions, and that a consultant is never off duty; *and*

v) recognition of the role of an AARC as an ambassador for the profession.

1 *AARC Application Guide*. www.trees.org.uk

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3. Report Writing

3.1 Principles of drafting reports

a) Think about the reader

Ultimately, your report will be successful if the reader is satisfied that their questions have been answered. The most effective way to achieve this is by telling a story:

i) begin by introducing yourself, setting out the instructions you are working to and the questions you have been asked to answer;

ii) introduce all the facts in a logical way;

iii) share your methodology and analysis;

iv) end by setting out your conclusions and recommendations.

b) Mind-set

Reports are about not just the layout, construction, reasoning behind and justification of information, but also your mind-set. The mind-set is the basis for your general approach. A good mind-set is one where the individual:

i) conveys authority without arrogance;

ii) shows a command of their technical knowledge and professional communication skills;

iii) has the ability to accept criticism constructively;

iv) is courteous;

v) has the ability to listen and impart knowledge and experience objectively; *and*

vi) above all, is a credible ambassador for the profession.

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c) **Three maxims that apply to any written or spoken work are:**

i) **Do not say or write anything that you would not be prepared to justify in the witness box**.

The chances are remote that any court action would ensue from the vast majority of work, but this maxim is a fundamental principle that is often ignored simply because there is no likely prospect of being in the witness box. The principles of the *Civil Procedure Rules* (CPR35) and where appropriate the *Criminal Procedure Rules* (CrimPR 33) should be adhered to at all times, even though you may not need to abide by every requirement in every case or provide evidential details to the same level of scrutiny. Adherence to these principles is not difficult if you have the right mind-set, and they are a natural complement to the AA's *Code of Conduct and Ethics*. You must also recognise your responsibilities to your Professional Indemnity insurers.

ii) **If, set against the terms of reference, the reader of a report has any substantive questions about its contents or consequences, the report has failed in its purpose.**

This would not necessarily mean that it is worthless, but a competent report must provide:

- a comprehensive portrayal of the problem (a consultant is usually only instructed to answer a problem);
- the means by which you have examined and reasoned the problem;
- the justifications for the outcome(s);
- any additional ancillary information as may be sensible; *and, crucially,*
- what to do next.

After reading a report the reader should have a full understanding of the subject, know where he or she stands, and know what to do next.

iii) **Staying within the bounds of one's professional field is essential.**

Failure to abide by this maxim could well undermine your credibility. These notes assume that you have no professional expertise in other fields; where you do, this may allow a degree of cross-over, but there is a considerable difference between having a qualification and being experienced in its use.

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3.2 Comprehensive knowledge and understanding of the subject areas addressed in a report

a) Knowledge

i) Any information contained within a report should be factually accurate and up to date, bearing in mind the date of issue of the report. Clearly, information that is demonstrably out of date at the time of issue, or inaccurate or misleading, is deficient.

ii) Where information is subject to conjecture or in any other way is not definitive, you should qualify the use of it.

iii) Where knowledge is derived from your own experience, this should be made clear.

iv) Sources of information should be acknowledged and you should not infringe copyright.

v) Plagiarism is unacceptable. However, there are many subjects where certain phraseology is in common use and its repetition is generally understood and accepted.

vi) Where relevant, you should demonstrate that you are aware of new thinking and research.

b) Interpretation of reference material and other data

i) Interpretation is different to application (the latter being how one uses information).

ii) Interpretation relates to understanding, and in this context it relates to information from other professional fields as well as arboriculture. You must demonstrate the ability to extract pertinent technical information in a manner that clearly demonstrates comprehension.

iii) In respect of laboratory results, you should understand the extent and limitations of the instructions issued to the laboratory and be aware of the consequent qualifications of the results.

iv) In respect of statistical analysis, you should understand the concept and context of data and be alert to sample construction, standard deviation and other statistical tools. Statistics is a discrete professional field and you should not attempt detailed analysis or draw proportional representations without setting out the limits of your knowledge.

v) Where calculations are undertaken, you must demonstrate an understanding of accuracy context. If the input material is approximate or the calculation is based upon a general principle applied to specific site circumstances, the output should reflect this. A very simple example is the radius of a Root Protection Area (RPA): would anyone with experience of trees on construction sites expect a radial measurement of, say, 7.42 metres to be appropriate?

c) Limits of experience and expertise

A professional should never stray from their professional discipline(s). You must recognise and explain the boundaries of your knowledge and experience, and how far you are able to interpret the matters in hand.

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3.3 Collecting and analysing information

a) Collecting and verifying data

i) It is inevitable that assumptions are made in certain circumstances, but a report should identify them as such. Statements containing factual data may need to be qualified, because some details may be anecdotal, some not current and others intrinsically inexact. In all work, but with litigation particularly, a professional arboriculturist must separate facts (verifiable data) from assumptions, justifications and opinions.

ii) Unnecessary data are a distraction and can confuse the issue, whereas insufficient data compromise the basis for subsequent discussion and opinion.

iii) If more than one method of data collection was available, explain why the particular method you used was chosen.

iv) Data must be clearly presented and cross-referenced.

v) Data supplied by others must be identified and attributed and, where appropriate, you should indicate your degree of reliance upon them.

vi) Descriptions must be consistent throughout a report.

vii) There are very few absolutes where trees are concerned, and matters that are subjective judgements should never be described as data.

viii) In order to be meaningful, data may need additional explanation and context.

ix) If, having gone to the trouble of collecting data of the appropriate accuracy and distinguishing between assumptions, opinions and facts, you present the data inaccurately or in a misleading way, the functionality of a report is compromised, as is your professionalism.

b) Employing critical analysis in a logical manner

i) Such analysis must be ruthlessly objective.

ii) The author and reader must be in no doubt that the method of analysis is appropriate, otherwise the derived opinion could be flawed.

iii) The explanation of the analysis must follow a logical progression, which means that the reasoning must flow with no gaps or sudden leaps. A complicated situation may benefit from being illustrated.

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3.4 Development of reasoned opinions

a) Logical progression from analysis

i) The primary task of the author of a report is to form an opinion.

ii) You should set out the reasoning in a manner that leads the reader to anticipate the opinion. Thus, the opinion should not be a surprise to the reader but more a confirmation of the analysis and logic.

b) Opinions should be clear and unambiguous

i) An opinion can be in one of three forms:

- **a firm opinion** – the only outcome
- **a conditional opinion** – the outcome is qualified
- **an optional opinion** – there is more than one outcome

ii) In each instance the outcome must be justified and must be a logical progression from the analysis of data.

iii) Sometimes there may be more than one potential course of action. Each different course must be justified, and the consequences explained, to enable the client to make a decision. You may favour one course over another, but that choice must be justified.

iv) There may be two diametrically opposed opinions about what to do, and this is a situation that can confront any decision-maker. You must set out the pros and cons of each.

v) A good mind-set allows you to set out the arguments that challenge your opinions and, by reasoned justification, to convince the decision-maker that your view should prevail.

vi) It follows, therefore, that all justifications which you employ and advance must stand rigorous interrogation. Furthermore, you must demonstrate that the consequences of the actions flowing from your justifications are sensible, practicable and sustainable.

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3.5 Conclusions leading to recommendations

a) Logical progression from analysis and opinions

i) A conclusion is what the reader should do with the opinion; the recommendations are how to carry it out.

ii) Just as the opinion should flow from the analysis, the conclusions should be the logical outcome of the opinion(s).

iii) The purpose of a report is to solve a problem and the conclusions will do just that.

iv) The conclusions should relate directly to the instructions. If there are, say, six specific items in the instructions, you must provide six corresponding conclusions, along with any other matters that are relevant.

v) Ideally, each conclusion will be short, as its function is to answer each item of the instructions. The details of the reasoning will be set out in the report.

b) Clarity and avoiding ambiguity

Your recommendations should be absolutely clear, with unambiguous specifications, and must include all actions necessary to implement the conclusions.

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3.6 Written output

- Does the report, letter, statement or email achieve its objective?
- Is it a product worthy of the title 'professional'?
- Have you offered what the client needs, and would they be prepared to pay for it?
- Does it tell a story?

The following elements will usually be expected in a report:

a) Terms of reference or instructions, and summary

i) Some authors separate these, some do not. It does not matter provided that the meaning is clear.

ii) Terms of reference (ToR) are the fundamental framework of a task.

iii) State who you are and why you are qualified to write the report.

iv) Some form of summary at the start of a report or statement is essential, but a summary is not necessarily required if a letter format is submitted.

b) Methods of data collection

i) You should list all means of data collection used and the standards, conventions and guidance observed. All methods should be appropriate to the task and clearly described.

ii) What did you actually do in collecting data? How did any limitations of access affect data collection? Where reasonable, such limitations must be stated. For example, is it acceptable when assessing the structural condition of a tree, where the matter is crucial, to say that access to the base of the tree was impeded?

iii) If you include details of the weather conditions, e.g. at the time of your site visit, explain what the implications of those conditions were.

iv) The description of the site should be clear and use orientation indicators.

v) Neighbouring land and the wider vicinity are usually important to provide the landscape context.

vi) There are very few instances when the soil type is of no relevance.

c) Limitations

i) Your report should set out all the factors that affect the gathering of data and writing of the report.

ii) Set out the protection status of trees on and off the site, or state if no investigation took place.

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d) **Distinct separation of facts from assumptions**

i) A fact is something that can be verified independently without conjecture.

ii) Anything that is not a fact is an assumption and must not be cited as a fact. Confusion between the two in a litigation statement is usually a major deficiency.

iii) Where facts are derived from material compiled by others, references must be cited and attributed.

iv) Where facts in relation to the specific matters of the site are derived from the work of others, particularly when they are not connected with you, you must state the degree of your reliance upon them.

v) There may be discrepancies in reporting measurements, for instance, of the stated distance between a tree and a structure, or tree height. You should state the conventions employed and any modifications of method required due to the site circumstances.

vi) When citing quantities and measurements, you must state the degree of accuracy adopted. The simplest way of doing this is to use terms such as ***"to the nearest [metre/centimetre/mile/hectare]"*** etc. If no measurement has been taken, this should be stated, in which case ***"about/approximately/estimated/or so"*** etc., may be used.

e) **Distinct separation of opinions from conclusions and recommendations**

i) Opinions are often included in the discussion part of a report or in the conclusions. There is no need for a distinct opinion section provided that the separation is clear. (You should be firm and offer opinions in the first person with direct phrases: ***"It is my opinion that ..."*** or ***"in my opinion ..."*** or ***"my opinion is ..."***.)

ii) Conclusions and recommendations should be under separate headings for the simple reasons that:

- conclusions answer the terms of reference; *and*
- recommendations set out the action needed to implement the conclusions.

f) **Clear and relevant graphics**

i) The importance of graphics cannot be over-emphasised. They include plans, photographs, diagrams, tables and any other visual presentations that are vital elements of a report.

ii) The single most important criterion is clarity. A picture is supposed to save a thousand words – it must not generate a thousand questions!

iii) Check that the graphic is comprehensible and assists with the portrayal of the subject matter. Where appropriate, use scale, orientation and a clear key for any colours or symbols used.

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g) **Navigation**

i) How the reader will navigate the report is something that requires very careful consideration: whoever reads it must be able to find their way around it.

ii) The title page of a report should state what its purpose is, including the relevant specific site details (where applicable), the author, their contact details and the date of the report.

iii) The contents page should be clear and accurate.

iv) Each page should be numbered with the total of the pages.

v) Cross-referencing must be accurate.

vi) Section headings must be clear and relate to the subject matter that follows them.

h) **Glossary, appendices and references**

i) If there are technical terms, these should either be defined within the text or referred to in a glossary.

ii) Appendices should be used whenever there is a requirement for detail that would spoil the flow of report text or would otherwise be a distraction.

iii) Where a report is presented as a hard-copy proof, it is usually helpful to have appendices identified either with a separation page of a different colour or with tabbed dividers.

iv) Extracts, whether scanned or typed, must be clearly identified as such and properly attributed and referenced.

v) Footnotes are usually identified with superscript numbers. If more than one superscript reference is made to a footnote or if for space reasons a footnote appears on a different page, this should be made clear.

vi) References: there should be a list of the technical books/papers and other documents referred to, together with details of other people approached to provide information.

i) **Writing style**

i) In terms of writing structure, there should be no long, convoluted sentences or long paragraphs and, generally, a paragraph should contain one concept.

ii) The layout of a page is also of critical importance, white space being particularly valuable as relief to the eye. The appearance of a report must be inviting and not a distraction.

iii) Individual styles of writing are absolutely essential and no-one would want to prescribe any form of homogenised or standard writing style.

iv) You must confine your technical comments to your field and not stray into other professional disciplines, e.g., describing the ecological value of a site in the absence of any technical evidence from an ecologist, or pronouncing upon the interpretation of law.

v) The report should be written in the first person. The use of the third person in the passive voice is usually the preferred style of authors who are writing on behalf of a company or other body. (**NB:** AARC status is personal and does not apply to others in a company.)

vi) The passive voice is to be avoided.

vii) If more than one person is involved with a piece of work, they should all be recognised.

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j) **Fit for purpose (reliability, clarity, accuracy and defensibility)**

i) The function of a report is to put over the message.

ii) A report is a product. It should do the job and be easy to read, use, refer to and integrate with other work. By writing a report you will demonstrate your understanding of the:

- report subject;
- needs and situation of the client;
- instructions and terms of reference;
- status of the work in terms of legal, technical and insurance responsibilities;
- problem; *and*
- required data;

and the need for:

- correct means of gathering data;
- appropriate verification of data;
- clear separation of verifiable facts;
- logical assimilation and interpretation of data;
- unambiguous discussion of and justification for the formation of opinions;
- clear portrayal of opinions and the consequent conclusions;
- lucid explanation and specification of recommendations; *and*
- clear indication to the client of what happens next.

k) **Proofreading**

Proofreading is one of the most difficult things for an author working on their own to master. Ideally, someone else who has no technical appreciation of arboriculture should do it because then the clarity of the report is truly tested. When we read our own work, we are familiar with the style and can be prone to word-blindness as a result. Of course, responsibility for proofreading and checking the veracity of the technical details must always lie with the report author.

l) **The bottom lines**

The bottom lines are quite simple:

i) **Is the client justified in paying your fee?**

ii) **Have you carried out the instructions in an unimpeachable manner?**

iii) **Have you upheld the AA's *Code of Conduct and Ethics*?**

iv) **Have you enhanced the profession of arboriculture?**

v) **Notwithstanding matters of confidentiality, would you be content to see the report have unrestricted availability?**

vi) **Would the client use you again?**

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Notes

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