Assessment reports come in many forms. Some are clear and concise; some are prolix and confused; some – perhaps the majority – fall between these two extremes. In this article I shall suggest practical strategies for writing clear and useful reports; and, in making my various suggestions, I shall call on the support of some well-known literary figures.

I'll begin with a piece of advice from the ancient Greek poet, Pindar:

"When someone feels they've done an excellent work piece of work, they all too often write very elaborate reports about it. But the discerning reader prefers to have the main points dealt with properly and not to be burdened with detail. A deft selection of material can perfectly convey the essence of the whole."

Bearing that advice in mind, I shall structure the article around:

**The Six Golden Rules of Report-writing:**

Be focused
Be brief
Be clear
Be appropriate
Be formulaic
Be quick

**Be focused**

*Read over your compositions and wherever you meet with a passage which you think is particularly fine, strike it out.*

*Samuel Johnson*
When embarking upon writing a report, it is good to focus your mind in the first instance *not* on the fascinating material you have ready to present, *not* on your carefully-crafted arguments and conclusions, *not* on the myriad sage comments you are eager to make – no, the first thing to focus on is the probable audience for your report. Who *exactly* are you writing for? What does your audience want and / or need to know?

Let’s take the case of a DSA assessment report: Who would you expect to read your report? Your client, of course, and a disability adviser, and, presumably, beyond these, an administrator in a far-off DSA office. It is also possible that, if your report were questioned in any way, another professional – a consultant psychologist or specialist teacher – might be brought in to review your work.

Having in your imagination identified your audience, you could then give some thought to the circumstances in which these various people will be reading what you have written. Do you imagine them to be very leisured individuals who will spend an enjoyable hour or so musing appreciatively over your report as they linger over a cappuccino? Or, are they likely to be very busy people in high-pressure jobs who want to spend the minimum possible time on reading your report – in other words, people who require your report to be brief, clear and concise?

Assuming the latter to be the case, you need carefully to tailor your report to suit this particular audience and to keep constantly in mind that this audience wishes to use your report for *practical* purposes. You are not reporting a research study or writing a journal paper, so you do not need to report *in detail* everything you have learned about your client. Neither are you writing a novel, so you do not need to include interesting musings and fanciful speculation, if these do not in any way inform your eventual conclusions.

**Be brief**

*A novel is a lazy short story, and a short story is a lazy poem.*

_Ezra Pound_

You will find that simply focusing on the needs of your audience, as suggested above, will be conducive to brevity.
Suppose you are writing the *Background* section of your report and you find that you have written three or four pages of detailed history. Now pause for a moment and think what the readers of your report, identified above, will be looking for in this section.

Obviously your client will already know his / her history and will simply be looking through to see if the information you have given is accurate rather than whether it is detailed.

The disability adviser will glance through this section with a practised eye to see if it looks like a typical ‘history’, but they will not be interested in reading every detail of, for example, the client’s performance in AS levels – they will be grateful for a succinct summary of the relevant material.

As regards DSA administrative staff in far-off offices, I tend to assume that, on the whole, these people are checking that our reports conform to the regulations (e.g., whether the approved tests have been done) rather than studying our case histories in detail.

It may be a matter of regret to the report-writer that, in taking account of audience needs, he/she is obliged to condense what might have been a richly-detailed piece of writing into a prosaic summary – but this is a sacrifice we report-writers need to accept, in the same way as many a creative writer has to accept swingeing cuts made in his/her epic novel by a merciless editor.

**Be clear**

*Let your prose style be pellucid as a mountain pool.*

*Ovid, 1st century BC*

I shall deal with the subject of clarity under three headings.

- Language.
- Overall structure of the report.
- Structure of sections in the report.

**Language**

The language of the report should be kept simple and straightforward. It should not have the complex structures and technical jargon that one would expect to find in, for example, a research paper; neither should it disorient the reader by suddenly veering from a formal to a colloquial style, for example (and this is a real example):
His phonological skills were slightly weak but all the same his word reading was fine.

It is inevitable that there will be some technical jargon in a report, e.g., ‘phonological skills’, ‘information processing’, but these are terms which, ideally, the assessor will have explained in the relevant section of the report.

Consistency of language is also important. Avoid using ‘visual tracking’ and ‘visual processing’ in different parts of the report to mean the same thing. If you use a phrase such as ‘information-processing’, explain exactly what you mean by this the first time you use it, and retain that same meaning throughout the report.

**Overall structure of the report**
The most helpful thing you can do to enable readers to follow the structure of your report is simply to outline the structure at the beginning of the report. For example, after the title page, you could present the structure as follows:

1. Summary
2. Background
3. Observations during assessment
4. Cognitive abilities
5. Phonological skills
6. Literacy and Numeracy
   (a) Reading
   (b) Spelling
   (c) Writing
   (d) Maths difficulties
7. Other relevant information
   (a) Dyspraxia / ADHD
   (b) Visual stress / binocular instability
8. Conclusions
   (a) General
   (b) Practical Implications
9. Recommendations

Appendix A: Test scores in detail
Appendix B: Notes on tests used
Care should be taken throughout the report that each section contains only information that is relevant to that section.

It is also vitally important that minimal technical information is given in the body of this report. Ideally, only a brief one-line description of the tests used should be given in the Cognitive, Phonological and Literacy/Numeracy sections so that the overall narrative of the report is not interrupted.

Similarly, it is very confusing if, in the middle of reporting, say, a client’s performance on memory tests, you suddenly launch into an explanation of how poor short-term memory affects study skills or daily life. This information should be presented later in the Practical Implications section, where it can be digested at leisure once the main body of information in the report has been understood.

I said above that a report should not read like a research study or a novel, but it could be said that it should resemble a detective story. In the early sections of the report, from Background up to the section before the Conclusions, you are gradually assembling information or evidence, gathering up clues, which, in the Conclusions section, you will bring together to support the conclusions that you have reached. Your reader should be able easily to follow this narrative.

There should be nothing in the Conclusions for which you have not given evidence earlier in the report; nor should clues have been left ‘lying about’ in the report which have not been taken up and interpreted in the Conclusions.

If you have found some information during the assessment which you are unable to understand or interpret, then it is important to state this clearly in the Conclusions; occasionally a cognitive profile will be plain baffling. If you want to muse at length on possible interpretations of such information, it might be better to assign this to a separate, clearly signposted, appendix rather than interrupt the narrative of the report with lengthy but inconclusive speculations.

Structure of sections in the report
Within the various sections of the report, it is helpful to the reader to vary the presentation of the material. For example, in the section on Dyspraxia, it would be tiring to present all the relevant dyspraxic history in a continuous text, but similarly it would be tedious to have it all
just listed as bullet points. So the best thing is to have a judicious mixture of the two, for example:

*Mr X reported that he has difficulty keeping his balance, and that he often bumps into people and drops or spills things.*

*He also reported difficulties with:*
  *handwriting*
  *typing*
  *doing domestic tasks requiring good manual skills*
  *driving a car*
  *organising his work schedule*

**Be appropriate**

*Rem tene, verba sequuntur.*

*Stick to the point and the right words will come.*

*Cato the Elder, 3rd century BC*

Please read the following three sentences and consider whether any of them is an appropriate way to begin a report:

*Jennifer is an attractive young woman who…*
*Cynthia is a dowdy middle-aged woman who…*
*Doris is an elderly but still alert woman who…*

You may perhaps feel that none of these three sentences is a good way to begin a report, and most people would agree that the second two are inadmissible. However, a number of assessors apparently feel that the first sentence is acceptable: they have used it, or variations of it, in their reports. This has caused annoyance, and even distress, to ‘attractive young women’ clients who feel that they had wanted to be assessed in relation to their specific performance difficulties, not in relation to their attractiveness.

While the above three sentences are obviously unacceptable, there can sometimes be a genuine difficulty in knowing how far, or in what way, to comment on, for example, a person’s social behaviour. In a dyspraxia assessment, poor social skills would be a possible indicator of dyspraxic problems, and so it could be relevant to refer to them. But how? Would it be appropriate to comment that a client failed to make eye contact, talked in a loud voice
and frequently interrupted the assessor? All of this might be true, but it would make awkward reading. Probably it is better to take refuge in general phrases such as ‘had difficulty with social interaction’.

Alternatively, it may be possible to present material of this sort as being part of a self-report by the client. If you have administered a dyspraxia questionnaire, your client may well have indicated that he/she has problems with social interaction, and you will then have discussed this during the session. In writing the report, you can use the same vocabulary that was used in your discussion with the client.

Another area which can present problems to the report-writer is mental health. A client may suffer from mental health problems, e.g., depression, which could be intertwined with their performance difficulties. Again, if possible, it is best to present this material as part of the client’s own report, and to request permission during the session for you to include mention of it in the written report.

Another question to which an assessor might give thought is what they should call their client. It is now common for first names to be used when strangers meet even in quite formal situations. However, a number of studies of the experience of patients in hospitals has shown that many people, especially in older age groups, object to being addressed by their first name by professionals who are strangers to them and often also decades younger than themselves. So it may be that Doris, the ‘elderly but still alert lady’ mentioned above, would prefer to have been called ‘Mrs Smith’.

Be formulaic

Don’t strive for originality; it is very much over-rated.

Oscar Wilde

The heading to this section should more accurately read ‘be formulaic wherever possible’. Obviously, there are many sections in a report where you will be reporting or describing things that are specific to a particular client. Equally, however, there are many other sections – descriptions of tests, test results, practical implications – which can be made part of a standard report format. Assessors may sometimes feel embarrassed if their reports, or parts of their reports, seem to be formulaic, feeling that this might suggest they have not given real thought to their client’s situation. However, it is possible to be formulaic in a thoughtful way.
For example, take the section in a report which describes how a client performs on the Digit Span test. If you have been doing assessments for a year or so, you will probably have found that there are a limited number of ways in which a person can perform a Digit Span test. So you can build up a basic ‘menu’ of descriptor sentences, as follows:

*Jennifer had a relatively low score on this test.*
*Jennifer appeared to be anxious doing this test, and this may have impaired her performance.*
*Jennifer performed much better on Digits Forward than on Digits Backward, suggesting that her working memory was weaker than her rote memory.*

You can keep a bank of such phrases in your format, putting them in different colours, so that you can easily pick out on screen the ones you need for a particular report. There is no merit in trying to vary these descriptions.

However, just because your report of performance on Digit Span does not vary from week to week, this does not mean that it may not evolve naturally over time. For example, you may become aware of new research which throws fresh light on the way people might be doing this test. So then you may suddenly find that you can add another phrase to your Digit Span bank, for example:

*Jennifer had a surprisingly high score on Digit Span, and when she was asked how she did this task, it became clear she was a visualiser and synaesthete: she said that she saw each of the numbers in colour and easily remembered them visually, as if they were a painting.*

Another section in which the writer can afford to be largely formulaic is the *Practical Implications* section. In this section you are explaining the implications of having a poor memory, poor visual processing, and so on; and in the context of, say, a DSA assessment, the implications of such cognitive weaknesses are likely to be the same for many clients. A sample excerpt from a paragraph on memory is as follows (on screen I put the phrases in different colours; here I have put them in different fonts):

*In consequence of his poor short-term memory, Mr X will have difficulty with tasks which require rapid processing of information, e.g., following complex written or spoken instructions, or taking notes from books or lectures. He may...*
sometimes lose the thread of an argument or debate, and find it hard to order his ideas quickly if he has to speak in public, e.g., in a seminar.

So, again, you could have a bank of Practical Implications paragraphs like this in your format, and then you can simply delete the phrases that are irrelevant.

The hand that deletes writes the true thing.

Meister Eckart
Be quick

*Be slow to resolve but quick in performance.*

*John Dryden*

It is obviously important that reports are thorough and comprehensive; however, this does not mean that one needs to take hours writing them. There are many ways to speed up report-writing that are not in any way detrimental to the quality of the report. Some of these ways have already been discussed in the previous section, e.g., having banks of formulaic phrases, listing difficulties in bullet points, etc.

However, there is still much more that can be done to improve efficiency if you make good use of the AutoCorrect function on your computer. All phrases that you use with any frequency (e.g., *short-term memory, phonological skills, above-average*) should all be put on the AutoCorrect system. For convenience, a shortcut to Autocorrect can be put on the desktop. Ideally use a four-letter code, like this:

| diff | difficulty | 4 |
| reco | reading comprehension | 2 + 2 |
| stme | short-term memory | 1 + 1 + 2 |
| hhwp | His handwriting was poor | 1 + 1 + 1 + 1 |

NB Separate general and particular phrases, e.g.:

He has weaknesses in *phonological skills* hhwi phsk

You can do whole paragraphs like this. I often take key words from a paragraph and construct my four-letter code from these, e.g.,

key words: visual tracking multiple choice

code: vtmc

paragraph: Poor visual tracking will make him exceptionally slow in dealing with questions which are in a multiple choice format and which require him to track back and forth between letters, figures or lines.
Also use the codes for:

**Alternative phrases**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>aver</td>
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<tr>
<td>abav</td>
<td>above average</td>
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<tr>
<td>abav</td>
<td>above average</td>
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<td>atto</td>
<td>at the top of the average range</td>
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</table>

**Spelling errors**

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<th>Code</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>eose</td>
<td>Examples of spelling errors are:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>brbr</td>
<td>brief - breif</td>
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<td>toto</td>
<td>occurrence - occurance</td>
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<td>irir</td>
<td>irresistible – irresistible</td>
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**Fiddly phrases (good to avoid having to use shift key)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ph.d</td>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
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<td>kclo</td>
<td>King’s College London</td>
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<tr>
<td>bams</td>
<td>Business and Media Studies</td>
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**Abilities**

<table>
<thead>
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<tr>
<td>astm</td>
<td>auditory short term-memory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>orsk</td>
<td>organisational skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tike</td>
<td>time-keeping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pssk</td>
<td>phonological sequencing skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reco</td>
<td>reading comprehension</td>
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</table>

**Adverbs**

<table>
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<td>exce</td>
<td>exceptionally</td>
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<tr>
<td>rela</td>
<td>relatively</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

And much much more…

Now read this!

Adam is studying for a phd in bams at kclo. hhdw astm and pssk. His orsk and tike are also poor. He scored abav in reco but his spel was poor. eose are: brbr, irir, ococ. hhwp.
NB If you change your computer, you will lose all the autocorrect phrases. Back them up on a second computer or keep a copy of them separately in a word file.

I hope this advice on report-writing will be useful, but for now...

Friend, let this be enough. If thou wouldst go on reading,
Go and thyself become the writing and the meaning.
Angelus Silesius

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