

Guide to writing an annual report

Start early

Producing an annual report shouldn't be a last-minute exercise. It's going to take some collaboration and coordination to collate all the information. Create a timeline, working backwards from publication date, printing/publishing, design, writing, receiving contributions and send out requests for contributions.

It's useful to collect information throughout the year so that you have plenty of options when you come to putting it all together.

- 🕒 Create a project timeline

Collaborate

Write a plan for who is going to do what, and let them know in good time. Send the *Briefing to Contributors* template below to those who will contribute.

- 🕒 Use a template to make sure you get all the information you need.

Know your audience

Be absolutely clear from the beginning on who will read your annual report and what they need to know. This clarifies the message and tone you want to set for the report, and ensures you include all the information you need to.

- 🕒 Clarify who will read your report and what they need to know.

Earn the attention of the reader

Though annual reports can be a legal requirement, that doesn't mean they can't be engaging. As long as you've included the items that are required, you can use it as an opportunity to connect with a larger audience, and showcase what you have achieved.

- 🕒 Make your report engaging.

Use data and visuals

Use data to show the impact of your activities. Use graphics and visuals to tell your story and make it more likely that your readers stay with you through the less compelling sections. Include a gallery of images, and even video if you produce an electronic report.

- 💡 Use graphics and visuals to tell your story.

Showcase your people

Stories about people – and the work they do – are much more compelling to readers than just numbers. Use these stories to engage your readers and help them understand the human side of your work.

- 💡 Tell stories about people to show readers the human side of your work.

Keep it snappy

Keep your report as short as possible. Most people don't have the time to read a long report in detail, so by keeping sections short and snappy, you can keep your readers engaged and interested long enough to get all your information across. Readers will be more likely to continue reading if they sense that you respect their time.

- 💡 Keep each section short and snappy.

Check it carefully

Once you have your final draft, ask someone else to read through it to check for spelling, grammar and punctuation, as well as to make sure the content makes sense and flows. You can hire a professional editor to save your team time, and to make sure your content is clear and reflects your organisation.

- 💡 Hire a professional editor to make sure your report is accurate and clear.

Make it visually appealing

Once your report has been edited, a designer can help you make it visually appealing. Consider a cover page, an easy-to-read font and contrasting colours.

- 💡 A designer can make your report look good and use design techniques to help readability.

Briefing for contributors

What is an annual report?

The annual report showcases and communicates our achievements, financial performance and future plans. It tells our stakeholders, the public and staff members what worked well in the past year, and it outlines where the growth opportunities are for the next year.

Our message

The main message of this year's report is:

What we need from you

Use the information in the table to target:

Contributor	
Section	Please write the section headed
Topics	This section should cover
What the audience needs to know	We want our stakeholders to know and understand that
Specifications	Your section should be
Deadline	Send your section to by

Writing your contribution

To write your section:

- only write on your topic – others will cover the other topics
- tell the readers what they need to know – if it is a poor outcome, explain why
- write the most important information near the top of the page, then fill in the detail
- use the following plain language techniques to make it easy to read:
 - use ‘we’ and ‘us’ rather than ‘the organisation’ and ‘it’
 - use active verbs that make it clear who did the action
 - choose the simplest words that accurately say what you want to say
 - use clear headings and bullet lists to make it skimmable
 - avoid jargon or terms the readers may not know
 - keep sentences short and focused on one idea.

Writing style

To make sure the annual report is consistent and professional, here are some basic guidelines.

Numbers

- Use commas in numerals more than four digits – \$1,234
- Use decimals only for small amounts – \$5.78
- Use currency codes only when referring to multiple currencies – NZD550
- Use an en dash in number ranges – \$10–\$20 million

Dates

- Write calendar years as 2024
- Write financial years as 2023–24
- Write dates as 25 August 2024, or 25/8/24 in tables

Other numbers

- Spell out *million*, or use the abbreviation *m* in tables – \$1.5 million
- Use the % in text and tables – 25%
- Use numerals for all numbers – 5 weeks’ time

Formatting

- Use sentence case for headings – Financial report
- Use bold for emphasis, not italics or underlining

Other style choices