Client Report vs. Academic Paper

Introduction: Why Client Reports Matter

Much of the writing you do during your college education is focused on academic papers and research reports. These follow the structure and language expected in scholarly publications. However, if you pursue a career outside academia—as many geology graduates do—you will more often be expected to communicate findings to clients and stakeholders rather than to fellow scientists.

Unfortunately, this kind of client-focused writing is rarely taught in college. As a result, many graduates default to academic styles that are overly technical, filled with unnecessary detail, and difficult for non-specialists to follow. In real-world scenarios, poor communication can have serious consequences—expert witnesses have even lost court cases because they failed to explain key information clearly to a jury.

In this course, you will learn how to write a professional client report based on your analytical work and research. This is an essential skill for any practicing geologist and excellent preparation for communicating with individuals outside the field. The following primer will guide you in preparing a real client report for a real client you will work with during the semester.

What is a client report?

Client reports and academic papers, while both forms of written communication, serve different purposes and thus have distinct characteristics. Client reports focus on informing clients about project results, using a practical, concise, and often visually-driven format. Academic papers, on the other hand, aim to contribute to scholarly knowledge, employing a formal, objective tone and structured format to present research findings and analysis.

Here are the key differences between a client report and an academic paper in the geologic sciences:

	CLIENT REPORT	ACADEMIC PAPER
Audience	Non-scientific stakeholders	Scientific Community
Purpose	Decision-making / application	Advance scientific understanding
Tone	Practical, concise, accessible	Formal, detailed, scholarly
Content focus	Results, recommendations	Data, analysis, theory
Method Detail	Summarized - focus on method	Comprehensive - method & procedures
Visuals	Functional (maps, cross sections)	Analytical (graphs, diagrams)

In essence: Client reports are about communicating results and building relationships, while academic papers are about disseminating research and contributing to knowledge.

The following table shows the differences of the focus and the structure or layout of a client report vs an academic paper.

	CLIENT REPORT	ACADEMIC PAPER
Focus	Solving a specific problem—e.g., mineral identification, site suitability, groundwater contamination, slope stability, resource evaluation, etc.	Testing hypotheses, developing theories, or documenting new findings—e.g., tectonic evolution, mineral chemistry, paleoclimate reconstruction, etc.
Structure / Layout of paper	▸ Executive Summary or question (usually NO abstract) ▸ Purpose & Scope (*can be short focusing on the client's request*) ▸ Methodology (*brief, usually **NO procedures***)* ▸ **Findings / Results with Interpretations & Recommendations** (*heart or most important part of the report*) ▸ Maps, figures, tables, appendices ▸ References (if needed)	▸ Abstract ▸ Introduction (problem, background, literature review) ▸ Methods with detailed Procedures ▸ Results (data-heavy) ▸ Discussion (interpretation, significance) ▸ Conclusions ▸ Acknowledgments ▸ References

***Note:** KNOW the difference between Method & Procedure. Client reports require a method description, **NOT** a procedural outline!* Method vs Procedure is explained here!

Writing a "Conclusion or Results" Paragraph in a Geologic Client Report

The **Conclusion** section of a client report is arguably the most critical part of the document. Clients often skip directly to this section to quickly understand the key findings of the investigation. Because of this, your conclusion must be clear, professional, and carefully worded.

In this course, we will adopt a user-friendly report structure by placing the "**Results and Conclusions**" section **at the beginning** of the report (follow the assignment template). This allows clients to see the outcome immediately, without having to navigate through detailed data or technical discussions. All supporting documentation—including laboratory results, field observations, and interpretive data—will follow in subsequent sections for those who want to explore the details.

Important Considerations When Writing Client-Focused Conclusions

Writing a conclusion for a **client report** differs significantly from writing one for **academic or research purposes**. One of the key differences involves **professional liability**. The language and tone used in client reports should reflect an awareness of potential legal and interpretive implications. Below are some essential guidelines:

1. Avoid First-Person Language

Do not use personal pronouns such as *I, me, we*, or *us*. In client reports, using first-person language can be interpreted as assuming personal responsibility for the findings. Instead, adopt objective third-person or passive voice constructions. For example, say:

> "The investigation determined…" instead of "We determined…"

This helps limit personal liability and ensures that the conclusions reflect the work of a professional entity rather than an individual.

2. Use Cautious and Qualified Language

While academic writing often emphasizes definitive and concise conclusions, client reports should leave room for interpretive flexibility. Conclusions in professional reports should acknowledge the limitations of the investigation and avoid overstatement. This is especially important in geology, where interpretations are often based on incomplete datasets or inferred conditions.

Use language that appropriately qualifies your statements. For example:

- "The most likely interpretation is…"
- "Based on the available data…"
- "Within the limitations of this investigation…"
- "To the best of our current understanding…"

These phrases help protect you and your institution from future claims should additional data or developments alter the original interpretation.

3. Address and Explain Contradictory Data Professionally

When data appears inconsistent or contradictory, do not casually attribute the issue to laboratory or procedural error. Doing so undermines your credibility as a professional and raises questions about your methods. If the discrepancy truly stems from operator error, it suggests poor quality control—and clients will rightly wonder why it wasn't corrected through reanalysis.

Instead, approach contradictory results as a natural part of geologic investigation and offer reasonable scientific explanations. Redirect attention to potential limitations in the sample itself or environmental conditions. For example:

> "Sample X contained an unusually high concentration of impurities, which may have affected the precision of the analytical results even through reanalysis."
>
> or
>
> "The mineralogy of the sample appears heterogeneous, which may explain the variance between subsamples. Therefore, the results reflect an average of multiple reanalytical measurements rather than a single conclusive value."

By doing this, you maintain professionalism, demonstrate critical thinking, and provide the client with a rational explanation without casting doubt on your competence or methodology.

Summary

Your client report should present clear, well-structured conclusions that are professional, cautiously worded, and based on the evidence available. Keep your audience in mind—clients want actionable information that is understandable and reliable, but they also expect that conclusions account for the inherent uncertainties in geologic investigations.