

Research Report Style Guide

*The Center for Rural Pennsylvania's
Grant and Mini Grant Programs*

THE CENTER FOR



Rural Pennsylvania

A Legislative Agency of the Pennsylvania General Assembly

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The Center for Rural Pennsylvania is a bipartisan, bicameral legislative agency that serves as a resource for rural policy within the Pennsylvania General Assembly. It was created in 1987 under Act 16, the Rural Revitalization Act, to promote and sustain the vitality of Pennsylvania's rural and small communities.

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Introduction

Final project reports for Center for Rural Pennsylvania grant-funded projects serve as the means to inform the Pennsylvania General Assembly about issues and opportunities facing rural Pennsylvanians and to provide that legislative body with public policy recommendations for consideration. Beyond the General Assembly, there is a large and diverse audience that regularly requests copies of reports on Center-funded research. It is the policy of the Center to summarize the full research report into an easy-to-read abbreviated document. A consistent style and format for final reports allows the Center's audiences to easily understand the project need, goals and objectives, methods, results, conclusions and policy considerations of each research project.

This style guide outlines the standard format required for final reports and provides guidelines for presenting material relating to certain specific issues included in each report, such as data, surveys, definitions and language.

Report Format

The body of the final report will conform to the following general format in sequence.

Executive Summary

An executive summary will be part of the final report and will summarize activities, process, outcomes, results and policy recommendations. It will be detachable from the final report for distribution as a free-standing document. The executive summary is to be no longer than three pages.

Title Page

The title page will list the title, report authors (with degrees and professional designations noted, such as Ph.D., A.I.C.P.), host institution, date of submission and the acknowledgment statement of the Grantor's support for the project as listed below.

“This project was made possible, in part, by a grant from the Center for Rural Pennsylvania, a legislative agency of the Pennsylvania General Assembly.”

Table of Contents

List all major topic headings and subheadings used in the report with associated page numbers. When appropriate, supply a list of tables or figures after the table of contents page.

Introduction

Provide project background by introducing the study itself so that the reader has some context for what they read. Include an explanation of the project need and a summary of related, current research, where appropriate, focusing on project-related issues that are relevant to rural Pennsylvania. Include a discussion of the role of government in addressing the focus topic.

Goals and Objectives

Provide a brief review of the project's goals and objectives. Provide this discussion in text and not outline format.

Methodology

Include the details of the project methodology. Provide details about all components of the work plan. See the sections below on data presentation and survey and interview presentation for more information.

Results

Present results in relation to the project's goals and objectives. Any objectives that were not met will be addressed and reasons for the lack of success explained. Goals achieved beyond the scope of the project will be identified. Deliverables specific to the project will be included in this section.

Conclusions

Provide conclusions drawn from the analysis of the results of the project. Do not reference new material in this section; all conclusions must flow from the project findings. Emphasize conclusions that lead to substantive policy recommendations. Specifically address items referenced in the conclusions section of the project cooperative agreement.

Policy considerations

As the Center for Rural Pennsylvania’s Grant Program focuses on identifying research-based policy considerations for the General Assembly—and to a lesser extent, the executive branch, local governments and other pertinent agencies—it is imperative that this section of the report be well thought out and provide detailed recommendations.

Policy considerations must:

- Provide a justification for the consideration that follows directly from the research results.
- Focus on rural Pennsylvania or issues related to it.
- Provide clear, research-based, unbiased considerations for policymakers to consider.
- Be specific about what agency or organization should address and/or implement each of the considerations.
- Where pertinent, refer to existing state programs, infrastructure, statutes or regulations.
- Include policy or program considerations addressing specific barriers or opportunities relating to the research findings.
- Identify any public funding sources, program guidelines, industry practices and unique situations that occur in Pennsylvania’s rural areas that have a bearing on the consideration.
- Be as detailed as possible.

References

Include a comprehensive list of sources cited in the text of the report. A consistent format must be followed throughout the entire references section.

Appendices

Include only necessary supporting documentation. Place copies of articles generated about the project by local media here, as well.

Specific Topics

Definitions and Language

Rural Definition

Research funded by the Center will use one of our definitions of rural (county, school district or municipal) listed below (unless otherwise approved by the Center prior to project start-up).

- ***County or school district definition***

A county or school district is rural when the number of persons per square mile within the county or school district is less than 274. Counties and school districts that have 274 persons or more per square mile are considered urban.

- ***Municipal definition***

A municipality is rural when the population density within the municipality is less than 274 persons per square mile or the municipality's total population is less than 2,500 unless more than 50 percent of the population lives in an urbanized area, as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau. All other municipalities are considered urban.

Even though most Center grant-funded reports use these definitions, all readers of our publications may not know or remember them. Therefore, in the final report, be sure to state the definition of rural that was used in sample selection, data analyses or other pertinent uses.

Definitions

Beyond the definition of rural, other terms in your report must be defined, especially those that are used as criteria for selecting best practices. For instance, if using the word “successful” or “effective,” explain what criteria were used to determine success or effectiveness.

Define terms when first used in the body of the report. Where there is a multitude of terms specific to a topic, some researchers provide a glossary of terms. While this is not required, it can be very useful and if provided, should be located in an appendix.

Jargon

The Center for Rural Pennsylvania publications are targeted to non-academic audiences; therefore, it is imperative that research reports be written for a lay audience. The readers of Center reports may not be experts in the field of study so all reports must be free of jargon specific to a field and must initially spell out all acronyms and keep their use to a minimum.

For the text of the report, discussion of any analytic or statistical models especially must be translated into language understandable by the lay reader. Explain the results of studies in terms of what the models and analyses tell. Do not use statistical lingo, such as “negative correlation.” Instead, discuss the results in easy to understand language, such as “as X increases, Y decreases.”

Survey, Interview and Focus Group Methodology

To help readers develop a clear understanding of survey, interview or focus group methods, include specific standard information in the report.

Surveys

For presentations of surveys prepared for the research project, provide the following:

- What was the purpose of the survey?
- Was the survey done by mail, phone, in-person or on-line? Why was this method selected as the appropriate approach for collecting data?
- How were survey participants selected?
- How were names, phone numbers, addresses and/or email addresses found?
- How many surveys were attempted? How many were completed? How did this rate compare with what was expected?
- What was the response rate? What methods were used to increase the response rate?
- What were the margins of error/confidence intervals for the survey results?

If applicable to the research project, provide analyses of survey results by rural/urban responses and by region.

Provide a copy of the survey questionnaire as an appendix to the report. Also provide the frequency of responses to each question.

All raw survey data must be submitted to the Center on disk or CD along with the final report.

Interviews

For discussions of key informant or other interviews, provide the following information:

- What was the purpose of the interviews?
- Were the interviews done by phone or in-person?
- Who conducted the interviews?
- How were the interview subjects selected?
- How many interviews were attempted? How many were completed?

Provide a copy of the interview protocol as an appendix to the report.

Focus Groups

To describe the focus group sessions, include the following information:

- Where was the focus group discussion held?
- How were participants selected?
- How many focus group participants were anticipated? How many actually participated?
- Who conducted the focus group?
- How were discussions recorded?

The presentation of focus group results must keep actual quotations from participants to a minimum.

Data and Technical Information Presentation

In discussions of data sources used for the project, provide a discussion of any data limitations. This also holds for discussions of survey or interview results. For surveys with small respondent pools or response rates, discuss the reliability of the survey results.

Explain any statistical analyses or tests done on data (such as T-tests, Ordinary Least Squares, Anova, etc.) in terms that lay readers can understand. Explain why the tests were selected, what they measure and what they show. Provide the rationale for using selected variables in analyses performed for the project.

If providing technical detail necessary for deeper understanding of data analyses or statistical tests, locate this information in an appendix. This will allow readers who are looking for the technical basis of the report to easily find this material and will enhance the readability of the body of the report for the lay reader.

When referencing time-based information, like the enactment of a bill or the date of survey collection, use the actual date and not phrases like “last year.”

Tables and charts must be blended into the text where they are discussed to enhance readability and simplicity.

In the body of the report, use numerals for all percents referenced. Write out the word “percent” instead of using the symbol. For all numbers referenced in the report, use numerals for the number 10 and above.

Disks or CDs of the final report must include the data behind all charts, tables, maps or graphs. This data should be in Excel, SPSS or another approved format. When publishing the findings, we often need to manipulate charts and graphs in our publication software and so we need this backup information.

Format

For ease of editing and transfer to publication software, final reports must be submitted in the following format.

- Microsoft Word
- Double-spaced
- Black and white print (including charts, graphs, maps, etc.)
- Left justification only
- 8 x 11 standard format
- Begin page numbering after the table of contents (or list of figures); continue consecutively until the end of the last appendix.
- If notes are necessary in the body of the report, use footnotes and not endnotes.
- The report must be written in third person.

All charts, tables and maps in the report must:

- Include a title and chart, table, figure or map number
- Include accurate labeling of columns, rows, axes, etc.
- Be referenced in the report text
- Identify the source and timeframe of data therein
- Identify whether financial figures are adjusted for inflation
- Identify whether differences in statistical data are statistically significant
- Identify the scope of the data (U.S., Pennsylvania, etc.)
- Be understandable to a lay audience
- Be consistent in format

- Use the most current data available (for example Census 2000) where applicable
- Indicate the number of respondents (if showing survey results)



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