

Site Visit Reports for Engineers

Engineering students may visit companies outside the university to learn about 'real life' examples of business and engineering management. Students are often required to 'write up' their observations and findings from a site visit. So what is the purpose of a site visit? What are common features of site visit reports? And what are some tips for both getting the most out of your visit and writing up your results?

Before you visit

A mistake that students made is that they inadequately prepare for their visit to their report location. Although students are often unaware of what to expect, a good idea is to do some preliminary research on the operations of the plant/company.

1. Use the internet, company reports, and books to investigate some of the primary processes.
2. Think about what you already know about the company, list as much information and work from there.

During your visit

The purpose of visit a 'real-life' example of engineering is to gain a better sense of how your field works. During your visit try to be actively engaged in what you are experiencing, some of the following tips may help you make the most out of your visit:

1. Ask questions when you have the opportunity. Staff involved in presenting the operations to the company is likely to expect questions, and are usually more than happy to accommodate.



2. Prepare some questions before you visit, but then modify them where possible.
3. Use question asking periods to ask any questions that might help with the writing up of your assignment.

A further good habit to get in to is taking notes during your visit. While a significant part of your trip might involve walking or traveling to/from the plant, use any practical opportunity to record any impressions/observations you have of any and every aspect of the visit. Some notes you might later review might not be directly related to writing up your report, but extra notes have a way of helping you write yourself into a report. A further benefit is that your notes and impressions are fresh and immediate – you don't have to rely on your memory to recall information at a later date.

Site Visit Report Checklist

Have you prepared for your site visit by:

- Reading up on the place you are visiting?
- Checked the website of the company for relevant information?
- Prepared a list of questions to ask staff?
- Read any assessment information BEFORE you visit the field?

Writing up your site visit report

Site visit reports may vary from subject to subject, but there are some general features. While you should always work from any course information you have been given, many site visit reports tend to include some or all of the following sections: an executive summary, an introduction, a brief overview of the location, a description of processes at the plant (e.g. chemical, machinery), a section where observations and reflections on the plant are discussed, and sometimes recommendations.

Reflection/Observation

When writing reflections/observations of your visit, it is not usually opportunity to make general statements like “I had a really good day” or “the operations seem effective”. The language is too subjective. And such impressions may leave your lecturer thinking, so what? The aim of reflection/observation is to do some of the following:

- To make links between what you’ve been doing in your course, what you’ve read and what actually goes on in industry.
- To evaluate the operations of the plant on certain criteria (eg. Technology, efficiency of process), and discuss the relative strengths and weaknesses of what you observed

If you have some previous work experience relating to the topic you might offer some professional advice. Perhaps picture yourself as a professional reviewing certain practices of the plant and providing some written feedback/comment to a manager outside the company.

To demonstrate to your lecturer that you observed (and understood) the most important features of the site and you acknowledge that these are some of the most important aspects of what ‘you got out’ of the visit.

As you can see, these aims are far more specific than taking a trip to the plant. In some respects, the visit is like a school excursion, but in other respects, it is much more an application of your formal education. Rather than sitting in a stodgy classroom, though, thinking about how Shell refinery works, why not just visit one and really see how it works.

Sections of a Site Visit Report

Always read your lecturer/tutor’s criteria for assessment as a guide to writing. Refer to any class notes, handouts, or grading information when you outline your draft. While additional works on writing can be found in the library, read the explanations below which may help you gain a better sense of the purpose of various sections:

Title Page

The title page should include the title of your visit. The title of your project should not be overly long – shorter is usually better. Include the name of the site, the date, and your name. Some lecturers also require other information like your student number and/or class. Check with your lecturer.

Executive Summary

An executive summary outlines the main features of your report. It is an abridged version of the whole report, so it is best to keep the language simple and straightforward. There are typical sections to an executive summary and this includes a few sentences on the background and location, a rationale for the report, some statement on what was observed, and a few sentences that offer conclusions and recommendations about the report.

Introduction

The introduction of the report should engage the reader. Rather than a dry and overly general description of the industry or company, it is better to set a context at the level of observation. That is, why not start your report with a series of comments on the importance of what is being observed, a problem that resulted from not adhering to standards, or with an engineering problem or solution.

Main Body of Report

This section usually involves explaining procedures and processes. Some of these might be chemical processes, construction, or commercial operations of the plant. Ensure that you check your assignment requirements.

Recommendations/Reflections

Most reports include a recommendation section. You might be required to reflect on your experience. If so, relate what you have observed with your professional experiences or wider reading and try and make connections there.

References

Refer to literature as directed by your lecturer. Some lecturers might require you to do reading in preparation for the assignment; in this case, you could refer to studies directly relating to the site of your visit. If studies are limited, you might cast a wider net and explore similar issues found at your site with other companies or plants.