

ESG REPORTING **MADE SIMPLE**

**A Practical
Guide to
GRI
Standards**

**No
Greenwashing.
No Jargon.
Just ESG
You'll Actually
Read.**

by Simon Mak, FSA, CFA

ESG Reporting Made Simple: A Practical Guide to
GRI Standards

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This book is as much yours as it is mine. Now, let's get started—because if I can figure this stuff out, so can you!

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Part 1: Getting Oriented (The Why and the What)

Chapter 1 — ESG in Plain English (and Why GRI Matters Now)

Case Study: How Walmart Uses GRI to Build Stakeholder Trust

Walmart strengthened stakeholder trust by using the GRI Standards and a detailed Content Index to make disclosures traceable for customers, NGOs, and regulators.

Facing growing expectations for transparency, Walmart shifted from a marketing-heavy ESG summary to a stakeholder-oriented report that references GRI and provides exact cross-references across governance, climate, supply chain, and ethics.

The GRI Content Index and clear ‘About Our Reporting’ section reduced ad-hoc data requests and enabled faster assurance tie-outs—while keeping disclosures usable for non-expert readers.

What You Can Learn:

- Publish a GRI Content Index so readers can trace evidence quickly.
- Explain boundaries and frameworks in an ‘About Our Reporting’ page.
- Design disclosures for all stakeholders, not just investors.

For more, see: Walmart FY2025 ESG Report — Ethics & Integrity → Corporate Governance and About Our Reporting

Let's be honest: the term "ESG" gets thrown around a lot. It stands for Environmental, Social, and Governance, but what does that actually mean? At its core, ESG is a way of looking at an organization's performance beyond just its financial results. It's a framework for understanding how a company impacts the world around it—the good, the bad, and the ugly—and how those impacts, in turn, can affect the company's long-term success.

Think of it like this: a company might be profitable, but if it's polluting the local river (an environmental impact), treating its workers poorly (a social impact), or has a board of directors that's asleep at the wheel (a governance issue), is it truly a



healthy, sustainable business? Increasingly, the answer is no.

This is where the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) Standards come in. GRI provides the world's most widely used and trusted framework for organizations to report on their impacts. It's a comprehensive set of standards that helps you measure, understand, and communicate your ESG performance in a consistent and credible way. The GRI Standards are not just for big multinational corporations; they are designed to be used by any organization, of any size, in any sector, anywhere in the world.

Why this matters now, more than ever:

Stakeholder expectations are rising: It's not just investors who care about ESG anymore. Your

customers, your employees, the communities where you operate, and even regulators are all demanding greater transparency about your impacts. They want to know that the companies they buy from, work for, and live alongside are acting responsibly. GRI is the language that these stakeholders understand.

The regulatory landscape is shifting. Governments and stock exchanges around the world are increasingly making ESG reporting mandatory. While some of these new regulations are focused on investor needs, many of them are built on the foundation of the GRI Standards. Even the new IFRS Sustainability Disclosure Standards (S1 and S2) explicitly allow companies to consider the GRI Standards when identifying sustainability-related risks and opportunities. This means that reporting with GRI can help you get ahead of the curve and be prepared for future regulatory requirements.

Sector-specific guidance is getting sharper: GRI is continuously developing new Sector Standards that provide more detailed and specific guidance for industries with high impacts, such as coal, agriculture, and mining. This means that you can now report on the issues that are most material to your specific sector, making your report even more relevant and valuable to your stakeholders.



Tip: If you're just starting out, don't try to boil the ocean. Start with GRI 3 to figure out what your most significant impacts are (your "material topics") and then use the Topic and Sector Standards to guide your reporting on those issues. It's a much more manageable and strategic approach than trying to report on everything at once.

Warning: One of the biggest mistakes that companies make is confusing GRI's "impact materiality" with the "financial materiality" of standards like IFRS/ISSB. They are two different but complementary concepts. IFRS/ISSB asks, "How do ESG issues affect our company's financial performance?" GRI asks, "How does our

company's activities affect the world?" You may need to answer both questions, but you should never confuse the two.

On the Web: The best place to get the latest GRI Standards is directly from the source. You can download the complete set of standards, as well as a wealth of other useful resources, from the GRI's official Resource Center.

Bottom line: In today's world, transparency is no longer optional. GRI is your playbook for meeting the growing demand for accountability and for building trust with all of your stakeholders. It's a powerful tool for not just reporting on your impacts but for managing them and, ultimately, for building a more sustainable and successful business.

Chapter 2 — IFRS vs GRI Without the Acronym Migraine

If you're feeling like you're drowning in a sea of ESG acronyms, you're not alone. The reporting landscape can be a confusing place, but we're here to throw you a life raft. Let's clear up the confusion around two of the most important sets of standards: the IFRS Sustainability Disclosure Standards (specifically IFRS S1 and S2) and the GRI Standards.

The simplest way to understand the difference is to remember this mantra: Investors ≈ IFRS/ISSB; Stakeholders ≈ GRI.

Let's break that down. The IFRS Sustainability Disclosure Standards are developed by the International Sustainability Standards Board (ISSB), which is part of the IFRS Foundation (the same body that sets the world's accounting standards). Their primary audience is investors, lenders, and other creditors. The goal of the IFRS standards is to provide these capital providers with information about sustainability-related risks and opportunities that could affect a company's financial performance and enterprise value. This is what we call financial materiality.

On the other hand, the GRI Standards are designed for a much broader audience of stakeholders, including employees, customers, communities, suppliers, and civil society. The goal of the GRI Standards is to help organizations report on their most significant impacts on the economy, environment, and people—both positive

and negative. This is what we call impact materiality.

Here's a simple table to help you keep it all straight:

Technical Stuff: It's important to know that many countries are now in the process of adopting the IFRS Sustainability Disclosure Standards as part of their mandatory reporting requirements. At the same time, the European Union has developed its own set of standards, the European Sustainability Reporting Standards (ESRS), which are based on the concept of "double materiality" (a combination of impact and financial materiality). The good news is that all of these standards are designed to be interoperable, and the GRI Standards have been a key building block for all of them. This means that if you start with GRI, you'll be in a strong position to meet the requirements of other standards as well.

Tip: If you're being asked to report using both IFRS and GRI, our advice is to start with GRI. By conducting a robust impact materiality assessment using the GRI Standards, you'll build a comprehensive understanding of your impacts and a solid foundation of data. You can then use that information to identify the subset of sustainability-related risks and opportunities that are financially material and report on them in accordance with the IFRS standards. This "GRI first" approach will

save you time and effort and ensure that you don't lose sight of your impacts on the world.

Cheat Sheet (pocket version): Still confused? Just remember this: IFRS S1/S2 is about how ESG affects us. GRI is about how we affect others. That's the core of it.

Bottom line: Don't let the acronyms intimidate you.
By understanding the fundamental difference
between financial materiality and impact
materiality, you can navigate the reporting
landscape with confidence. Use GRI to tell your
impact story to all of your stakeholders and use
IFRS to provide your investors with the financial
information they need. The two are
complementary, not contradictory.

Chapter 3 — How to Use This Book Without Reading Every Single Page

Case Study: Accenture's 'Find-It-Fast' GRI Content Index

Accenture's GRI Content Index gives users a direct path to each disclosure, improving usability for NGOs, regulators, and assurance providers.

Accenture has produced a GRI Index for years. In 2024, the index again lists all relevant GRI disclosures 'with references, linking to the exact sections in the 360° Value Report and data tables.

This practice lowers friction for assurance, saves the team time, and raises reader confidence in traceability.

What You Can Learn:

- Use GRI's free Content Index template to structure your index.
- Link each disclosure to an exact report page or data table.
- Keep the index updated annually to maintain trust.

For more, see: Accenture Global Reporting Initiative Content Index (2024).

We know you're busy, so we've designed this book to be a practical, easy-to-use resource that you can dip in and out of as you need it. You don't have to read it from cover to cover to get value from it. Think of it as a buffet, not a set menu. You can choose the path that best suits your needs and your available time.

Here are a few suggested paths you can take:

The "I have a meeting in an hour" Crash Course: If you're short on time and need to get up to speed quickly, this is the path for you. Start by reading Chapter 2 to get a clear understanding of the difference between IFRS and GRI. Then, skim Chapter 6 to learn about the heart of the GRI Standards: determining your material topics. Finally, grab the 30-Day Quick Start plan from Chapter 7 and the GRI Content Index template from Chapter 12. In just 60 minutes, you'll have a solid grasp of the basics and a clear plan of action.

The "I have a free afternoon" Deep Dive: If you have a bit more time to spare, you can take a deeper dive into the core of the GRI Standards. Start by reading Chapters 4, 5, and 6 to get a thorough understanding of the GRI Universal Standards (GRI 1, 2, and 3). Then, jump to Chapters 11 and 12 to learn about the GRI Management Approach and how to build a proper GRI Content Index. To bring it all to life, read one of the composite case studies in Chapter 13, 14, or 15. By the end of the afternoon, you'll have a

scoped-out plan for your first draft and a clear idea of who needs to be involved.

The “I want to be a GRI master” Mastery Track: If you’re ready to go all in and become a true GRI expert, this is the path for you. Read the book from end to end and be sure to complete the GRI Maturity Self-Assessment in Chapter 16. Then, roll up your sleeves and get to work with the “surprise tools” in the Appendices. By the time you’re done, you’ll have a deep understanding of the GRI Standards and a set of practical tools to help you take your reporting to the next level.

Your 30-Day Quick Start (a sneak peek)

No matter which path you choose, our 30-Day Quick Start plan in Chapter 7 will be your best friend. Here’s a quick overview of what you’ll be doing:

Week 1: Assemble your team and map your impacts. You’ll build a cross-functional team and conduct a lightweight materiality assessment to identify your most significant impacts.

Week 2: Hunt for data and draft your management approach. You’ll start collecting the data you need and begin to draft your management approach for each of your material topics.

Week 3: Write the narrative and assemble the Content Index. You’ll start to write the core

narrative of your report and build out your GRI Content Index.

Week 4: Polish, publish, and plan. You'll review and refine your report, finalize your Content Index, and then hit the "publish" button. And, most importantly, you'll create a plan for how to make your report even better next year.

On the Web:

The GRI Universal Standards are the foundation of all GRI reporting. You can find them, along with helpful guidance and FAQs, on the GRI website.

The GRI also has a fantastic download center where you can find the complete set of standards, as well as any new or updated Topic and Sector Standards. Be sure to check it regularly to make sure you're using the latest versions.

Bottom line: This book is designed to be a flexible and practical tool that you can use in the way that works best for you. So, choose your path, grab your tools, and let's get started on your GRI reporting journey!

Part 2: The GRI Rulebook Made Friendly

Chapter 4 — GRI 1 (Foundation): The Ground Rules

Case Study: Dow's 'In Accordance' Discipline with GRI

Dow demonstrates what 'in accordance with GRI' looks like: a formal GRI Content Index, assurance on key indicators, and clear boundaries.

Dow's disclosure report provides the GRI Content Index and describes how greenhouse gas and topic disclosures are prepared alongside other frameworks.

Limited assurance over selected disclosures reinforces credibility with stakeholders.

What You Can Learn:

- Publish a GRI Content Index to anchor your report.
- State reporting scope and boundaries clearly.
- Consider limited assurance for key metrics.

For more, see: Dow GRI Disclosure Report — GRI Content Index (2022/2023).

If you think of your GRI report as a house, then GRI 1 is the foundation, the plumbing, and the electrical wiring. It's the invisible but essential infrastructure that holds everything together and makes it all work. GRI 1 sets out the fundamental principles that you must apply across your entire report, and it clarifies the basic architecture of the GRI Standards, showing how GRI 1, GRI 2, and GRI 3 work together to create a complete and credible picture of your organization's impacts.

So, what is GRI 1 trying to get you to do, in plain English? It's all about embedding a new way of thinking into your organization—a way of thinking that is focused on your impacts.

Adopt an impact lens: Your primary job as a GRI reporter is to identify, understand, and explain your organization's impacts on the economy, the environment, and people. This includes both the good (your positive impacts) and the bad (your negative impacts), as well as the impacts that have already happened (actual impacts) and those that could happen in the future (potential impacts). And it doesn't stop there. You also need to explain what you're doing about these impacts—from the policies you have in place to the actions you're taking, the targets you've set, and how you're evaluating your effectiveness.

Ground your disclosures in due diligence: GRI 1 makes it clear that your reporting should be based on a process of due diligence. This is a term that

comes from the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, and it refers to the process of identifying, preventing, mitigating, and accounting for how you address your adverse human rights impacts. GRI has expanded this concept to cover all of your impacts, both environmental and social. So, instead of just listing your community investment projects, you need to be able to show that you have a systematic process for understanding and managing your impacts.

Be complete and comparable: Your report should be a complete and honest account of your impacts. This means that you need to consider the full boundary of your impacts, which may extend far beyond your own four walls to include your suppliers, your customers, and even the end-of-life of your products. You also need to ensure that the information you provide is accurate, balanced (reporting the bad as well as the good), and timely. And, to the extent possible, it should be presented in a way that allows your stakeholders to compare your performance over time and with other organizations.

The principles (translated from standard-speak)

To help you achieve this, GRI 1 sets out a number of key principles:

Accuracy & balance: Don't just cherry-pick the good news. A credible report will provide a

balanced account of your performance, including both your successes and your challenges.

Clarity & comparability: Use clear, simple language and define your terms. If you're reporting on metrics, be sure to explain how you've calculated them and what the boundaries are. This will help your readers to understand your data and to compare it with others.

Completeness: Don't leave out important information just because it's hard to get or because it doesn't paint a pretty picture. Your report should cover all of your significant impacts.

Sustainability context: Your performance doesn't happen in a vacuum. You should explain your performance in the context of the wider world, such as the water stress in the regions where you operate or the social and economic conditions of your workforce.

Tip: To make sure you're sticking to these principles, create a simple "Principles Log." Before you publish your report, go through the log and tick off each principle. Have you included both positive and negative impacts? Are your boundaries clearly defined? Have you explained any limitations in your data? This simple checklist can save you from a lot of last-minute headaches.

Boundary: who and what is "in"?

The concept of “boundary” is one of the most important and challenging aspects of GRI reporting. In the past, many companies only reported on the impacts of their own operations. But GRI makes it clear that your responsibility extends beyond your own four walls. The boundary of your report should be determined by where your impacts occur, not by your corporate or legal structure. This means that you may need to report on the impacts of your subsidiaries, your joint ventures, your suppliers, your distributors, and even how your products are used and disposed of.

Boundary Tracer (mini-exercise)



This can feel overwhelming, so let's make it practical. Try this mini-exercise:

Pick one of your likely material topics, like “forced labor” or “greenhouse gas emissions.”

Map out your value chain and identify where the most significant impacts related to this topic occur. Is it in your own factories? In the fields where your raw materials are grown? In the trucks that transport your products?

For each of these impact “hotspots,” consider how much influence or leverage you have to make a change.

Based on this, decide on the scope of your disclosure and what you will include in your management approach (your policies, actions, and targets).

Finally, be honest about your limitations. If you can’t get data from your tier-two suppliers, for example, acknowledge this and explain what you’re doing to try to close this gap in the future.

Warning: It can be tempting to only report on the parts of your value chain where you have good data or where you’re performing well. But this kind of “cherry-picking” will undermine the credibility of your report. It’s much better to be transparent about your gaps and to show that you have a plan to address them.



Due diligence (GRI's big upgrade)

As we mentioned earlier, GRI 1 has baked the concept of due diligence into the very foundation of the GRI Standards. This is a big deal. It means that you're now expected to have a systematic process for identifying, preventing, mitigating, and accounting for your impacts.

Technical Stuff: You won't find a specific disclosure in GRI that says, "Describe your due diligence process here." Instead, the expectation of due diligence is woven throughout the GRI Standards, particularly in GRI 2 and GRI 3. You'll provide evidence of your due diligence process through your disclosures on policies (2-23), how you embed those policies in your organization (2-24), your grievance mechanisms (2-25), your processes for remediation (2-26), and your

management approach for each of your material topics (3-3).

On the Web:

The GRI's Universal Standards hub is the best place to get the official text of the standards, as well as helpful guidance and FAQs.

The GRI's Resource Center is where you'll find the latest consolidated downloads of all the GRI Standards, including any new or updated Sector Standards.

Keep an eye on the GRI's news page for announcements about new Sector Standards and their effective dates. For example, the new standards for the coal and agriculture sectors are effective for reporting from 2024, while the new mining standard will be effective from 2026.

Bottom line: GRI 1 is the bedrock of your report. It provides the principles, the architecture, and the core concepts of impact, boundary, and due diligence. If you can get these fundamentals right, the rest of your report will have a solid foundation of credibility and integrity.

Chapter 5 — GRI 2 (General Disclosures): The Who, How, and With Whom

Case Study: Allianz Uses GRI 2 to Explain Governance

Allianz's GRI 2 disclosures detail governance roles, delegation, remuneration links, and reporting boundaries—making oversight visible and auditable.

The GRI Content Index maps each GRI 2 item to exact pages in the Sustainability Report and Annual Report, improving comparability and review.

Readers can verify who is accountable and how decisions are made about impacts.

What You Can Learn:

- Map GRI 2 disclosures to exact pages and documents.
- Disclose how responsibilities are delegated for impacts.
- Link remuneration to sustainability performance where relevant.

For more, see: Allianz GRI Content Index 2023 → GRI 2: General Disclosures.

If GRI 1 is the foundation of your report, then GRI 2 is the “about us” section on steroids. It’s your organization’s passport, providing your stakeholders with the essential information they need to understand who you are, how you’re governed, what you stand for, and how you interact with the world. These are the general disclosures that every organization reporting with GRI needs to provide, regardless of what your material topics are.

Let’s break down the major disclosure blocks in GRI 2 into a plain English map:

Your Organizational Profile & Reporting Practices (Disclosures 2-1 to 2-5): This is the basic nuts and bolts of your report. You’ll need to state your organization’s name, where you’re located, which entities are included in your report, whether you’re restating any information from previous reports, and whether your report has been externally assured.

Your Activities & Value Chain (Disclosure 2-6): Here, you’ll provide a snapshot of your business. What sectors are you in? What does your value chain look like? Who are your key business partners? And have there been any major changes since your last report?

Your Governance Structure (Disclosures 2-9 to 2-18): This is a crucial section that shows your stakeholders who are in charge and how they are

held accountable. You'll need to describe your governance structure, how responsibilities are delegated, whether there are any links between executive pay and sustainability performance, how you manage conflicts of interest, how critical concerns are communicated to the highest levels of your organization, and what role your board plays in overseeing your management of impacts.

Your Policies & Practices (Disclosures 2-23 to 2-27): This is where you get to the heart of your accountability story. You'll need to describe your policy commitments on key issues, how you embed those commitments into your day-to-day operations, your processes for providing remedy when you cause or contribute to negative impacts, and your mechanisms for stakeholders to raise concerns. You'll also need to report on your compliance with laws and regulations.

Your Stakeholder Engagement (Disclosure 2-29) and Collective Bargaining (Disclosure 2-30): Finally, you'll need to describe your approach to stakeholder engagement and report on the extent to which your employees are covered by collective bargaining agreements.

Remember: This is not a boilerplate, check-the-box exercise. GRI expects you to be specific. Don't just say you have a policy on human rights; explain what that policy covers and how you're putting it into practice. Don't just say you have a grievance mechanism; explain how it works, who

can use it, and what the outcomes have been. The more specific and transparent you can be, the more credible your report will be.

Chapter 6 — GRI 3 (Material Topics): What Really Matters

Case Study: National Grid Makes Material Topics Traceable

National Grid's GRI Index cross-references a public Materiality Assessment note, showing how impact topics were determined and where each disclosure lives.

The reporting suite hosts the GRI Index, methodology, assurance, and the materiality note—creating a single place for reviewers and stakeholders to verify disclosures.

This approach improves stakeholder confidence and simplifies assurance.

What You Can Learn:

- Publish your materiality assessment note and link it in the GRI Index.
- Keep methodology and assurance statements accessible.
- Centralize all reporting artifacts in a single hub.

For more, see: National Grid — GRI Standards Content Index (FY25) and ESG Reporting Centre.

This is where the real magic of GRI reporting happens. GRI 3 is your guide to figuring out which ESG topics are most significant for your organization and your stakeholders. This process, known as determining your material topics, is the absolute heart of your GRI report. It's not a box-ticking exercise or a matter of guesswork; it's a strategic process of identifying where your organization has the biggest impacts on the economy, the environment, and people.

The process of determining your material topics can be broken down into a few key steps:

Identify your impacts: The first step is to create a comprehensive list of your organization's actual and potential impacts. You'll need to look across all of your activities and business relationships—from your supply chain to your own operations to the use and disposal of your products. Think about both your negative and positive impacts and consider both short-term and long-term effects.

Assess the significance of your impacts: Once you have your list of impacts, you need to assess their significance. For negative impacts, this is based on their severity, which is a combination of their scale (how grave the impact is), their scope (how widespread it is), and their irremediable character (how hard it is to put right). For potential impacts, you also need to consider their likelihood. For positive impacts, you'll assess their significance based on their scale and scope.

Prioritize your impacts for reporting: Based on your assessment of their significance, you'll then prioritize your impacts for reporting. The most significant impacts will become your material topics.

Once you have your list of material topics, you're not done yet. For each material topic, you must then describe your Management Approach (Disclosure 3-3). This is a narrative explanation of how you are managing the topic, and it should include:

Your policies or commitments that are relevant to the topic.

The actions you are taking to manage the topic and its related impacts.

How you are tracking the effectiveness of these actions, including any targets you have set.

How your grievance mechanisms are used to identify and address concerns related to the topic.

Warning: One of the most common mistakes in GRI reporting is to choose material topics based on what your competitors are reporting on or what data you happen to have readily available. This is a recipe for a weak and irrelevant report. GRI 3 is very clear that you must take an impact-based approach. Start with your impacts, not with a pre-existing list of indicators.

Technical Stuff: The list of material topics that you determine using GRI 3 is what will guide your selection of specific performance indicators from the GRI Topic Standards. For example, if you determine that “Occupational Health and Safety” is a material topic for your organization, you will then use GRI 403: Occupational Health and Safety to report on specific indicators related to that topic.

On the Web: The GRI website has a wealth of resources to help you with the process of determining your material topics, including detailed guidance and frequently asked questions on GRI 3.

Bottom line: GRI 3 is the engine of your report. A robust, impact-based materiality assessment is what will give your report focus, credibility, and strategic relevance. It's the process that will help you to move beyond simply reporting on your activities to truly understanding and managing your impacts.

Part 3: Doing GRI Without Tears (Hands-On)

Chapter 7 — Your First GRI Report in 30 Days

Case Study: DuPont's 'Prepared with Reference' GRI Index

DuPont's GRI Index 'with reference' provides a pragmatic blueprint for first-time or fast-track reporters to ship a credible v1 and iterate.

The Index lists universal and topic disclosures with links to the Sustainability Report and appendices. The resources hub consolidates prior-year reports and assurance statements.

Teams use the index to scope work, find gaps, and plan improvements for the next cycle.

What You Can Learn:

- Start with a 'prepared with reference' GRI Index if you're new.
- Link disclosures to appendices for data tables and methods.
- Maintain a public archive of reports and assurance.

For more, see: DuPont — 2025 GRI Content Index and Sustainability resources & downloads.

So, you've decided to take the plunge and create your first GRI report. Congratulations! It might seem like a daunting task, but it doesn't have to be. With a clear plan and a focused effort, you can get from a standing start to a published report in just 30 days. This chapter provides a practical, week-by-week sprint plan to guide you through the process. The goal here is not perfection, but progress. A credible, transparent report that acknowledges where you plan to improve is far more valuable than a perfect report that never gets published.

Week 1: Assemble Your Team and Map Your Impacts.

The first week is all about laying the groundwork. Your first task is to build a cross-functional team. Your GRI report is not a project that can be done in isolation by the sustainability department. You'll need input and buy-in from across the organization. Your team should include representatives from operations, human resources, legal, finance, and communications. Once you have your team in place, you can get to work on a lightweight, impact-based materiality assessment, as outlined in GRI 3. This doesn't have to be a long, drawn-out process. You can get a long way in a single workshop by brainstorming your organization's most significant impacts on the economy, the environment, and people. At the end of the week, you should have a draft list of your

material topics and a clear understanding of the boundaries for each of them.

Week 2: Hunt for Data and Draft Your Management Approach.

With your material topics defined, the second week is all about the data. For each of your material topics, you'll need to identify the relevant data points and assign owners to collect them. This is where your cross-functional team will be invaluable. In some cases, you may find that you don't have precise data available. That's okay. In the spirit of transparency, you can use estimations, as long as you are clear about the methodology you've used. In parallel with your data hunt, you can begin to draft your management approach for each material topic (as required by Disclosure 3-3). This is where you'll outline your policies, actions, targets, and how you're evaluating your effectiveness.

Week 3: Write the Narrative and Assemble the Content Index.

By the third week, you should have a good amount of data and a solid draft of your management approaches. Now it's time to start weaving it all together into a coherent narrative. This is where you can bring your report to life, telling the story of your impacts and how you're managing them. At the same time, you should start to assemble a working version of your GRI Content Index. The

Content Index is the backbone of your report, and creating it early will help you to see where you have gaps in your disclosures.

Week 4: Polish, Publish, and Plan.

The final week is all about review and refinement. Go back to the gaps you identified in Week 3 and do your best to fill them. Perform a final sanity check against the GRI 2 general disclosures to make sure you haven't missed anything. And then, finalize your Content Index. After a final review by your team and key stakeholders, you're ready to hit the "publish" button. But your work isn't done yet. The final, and perhaps most important, step is to document the lessons you've learned and to create a clear plan for how you'll improve your report in your next reporting cycle.

Bottom line: A 30-day sprint to your first GRI report is ambitious, but it's absolutely achievable. The key is to stay focused on your most significant impacts, to be transparent about your progress and your challenges, and to embrace the spirit of continuous improvement. Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good. Just get started!

Chapter 8 — Build Your Data Machine



Case Study: Microsoft Templates Streamline GRI Reporting

Microsoft's Sustainability Manager includes GRI templates, workflows, and exports—reducing manual effort and cycle time across multi-framework reporting.

Teams select GRI in External Reporting, generate requirements, assign owners and approvers, attach evidence, and export disclosure drafts (Excel/HTML).

This systematizes reporting for GRI, CSRD, IFRS and others without duplicating work.

What You Can Learn:

- Use software workflows to manage disclosures and approvals.
- Reuse evidence across frameworks to cut rework.
- Export drafts for quick stakeholder review.

For more, see: Microsoft Learn — ‘Generate reports with external reporting’ and ‘Create assessments’ (select GRI).

A credible GRI report is built on the foundation of reliable data. But for many organizations, data collection is a chaotic, last-minute scramble. It doesn't have to be this way. By building a simple but robust "data machine," you can ensure that your data is consistent, accurate, and ready for assurance, without all the stress and drama. This chapter will show you how.

Your first and most important tool is a Data Dictionary. This is a central document that provides a single source of truth for all of your ESG metrics. For every metric you report on, your data dictionary should include:

The indicator ID: The official GRI indicator number (e.g., GRI 305-1 for direct GHG emissions).

A precise definition: What exactly are you measuring?

The unit of measurement: (e.g., tonnes of CO2e).

The baseline year: The starting point against which you'll measure your progress.

Any normalization methods: Are you reporting absolute numbers or normalizing by revenue or production?

The data source: Where does the data come from?

The data owner: Who is responsible for the accuracy of the data?

The collection frequency: How often is the data collected?

A link to the evidence: Where is the proof to back up the number?

Any limitations or estimation methods: Be transparent about any gaps or assumptions.

Building a data dictionary may sound like a lot of work, but it will save you a huge amount of time and effort in the long run. It will also make your data much more credible and your report much easier to assure.

Once you have your data dictionary in place, you need to establish clear data governance. This means assigning clear ownership and responsibility for data collection and quality control. For each metric, there should be one person who is ultimately accountable for its accuracy. You should also establish a regular cadence for data collection and review. Some data, like safety incidents, might need to be tracked on a monthly basis, while other data might only need to be collected annually.

Finally, you need to build an evidence locker. This is a centralized repository where you store all of the documentation and proof points that back up the claims in your report. This could include

everything from utility bills and invoices to environmental permits, training records, and board minutes. Having this evidence readily available will not only improve the quality of your current report but will also make it assurance-ready from day one, smoothing the path for future third-party verification.

On the Web: There are many sophisticated software platforms available to help you manage your ESG data. But you don't need to spend a lot of money to get started. A well-organized set of spreadsheets can be a surprisingly effective data machine, especially for smaller organizations.

Bottom line: Building a data machine isn't about buying expensive software; it's about establishing discipline and clear processes. A simple data dictionary, clear ownership, and a commitment to evidence will make your reporting more credible, your life easier, and your auditors happier.

Chapter 9 — Stakeholder Engagement That Actually Engages



Case Study: National Grid Links Stakeholder Inputs to Disclosures

National Grid's reporting hub consolidates GRI Index, data tables and methodology—showing how stakeholder engagement informs material topics and metrics.

The suite provides a clear path from stakeholder expectations to published disclosures and KPIs, simplifying external review and public dialogue.

This boosts transparency and reduces back-and-forth during consultations.

What You Can Learn:

- Publish methodology alongside the GRI Index.
- Keep a data table available for quick checks by stakeholders.
- Show how stakeholder inputs informed topic selection.

For more, see: National Grid — Our Reporting Suite (GRI Index, Methodology, Data tables).

Stakeholder engagement is one of the core principles of the GRI Standards, but it's also one of the most misunderstood. Too often, it's treated as a superficial, check-the-box exercise—a survey sent out once a year, or a few token meetings with "friendly" stakeholders. But that's not what GRI is about. Meaningful engagement is a two-way street. It's about building relationships, listening to diverse perspectives, and being accountable to those who are affected by your organization's activities. This chapter will show you how to move beyond superficial engagement to a process that is inclusive, responsive, and truly valuable.

The first step is stakeholder mapping. You can't engage with your stakeholders if you don't know who they are. Start by brainstorming all of the groups that are affected by your organization's activities or that have a strong interest in them. This will likely include your employees, your customers, your suppliers, the communities where you operate, your investors, and regulators. But don't stop there. Think about less obvious stakeholders, like NGOs, labor unions, or the workers in your supply chain. For each group, map out their relationship to your company, how they are affected by your impacts, the current channels you use to engage with them, and any barriers to accessibility they might face.

With a clear map of your stakeholders, you can then design inclusive channels for dialogue. This

means going beyond the traditional methods of engagement and finding ways to reach all of your stakeholders, not just the ones who are easiest to reach. This could include workshops, focus groups, community meetings, or partnerships with local organizations. It's also crucial to ensure that your engagement is culturally appropriate and accessible to people with disabilities or those who speak different languages. And remember, engagement is not a one-time event. It should be an ongoing process of dialogue and relationship-building.

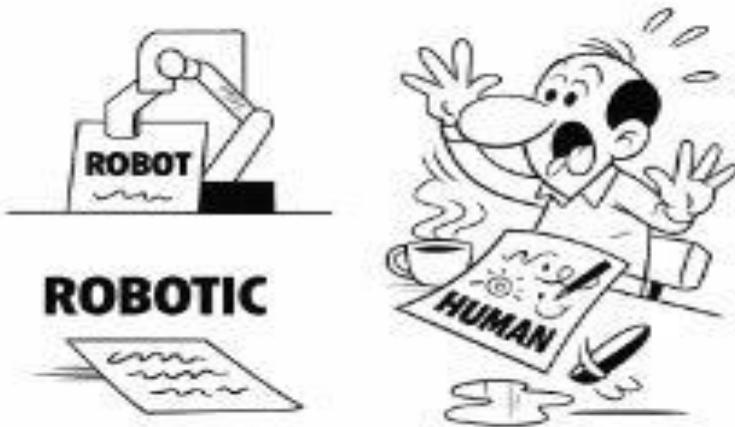
Of course, engagement is pointless if you don't do anything with the information you gather. It's essential to document the outcomes of your engagement and to close the loop by communicating back to your stakeholders how their input has been considered and has influenced your decisions. This is what builds trust and makes your stakeholders feel valued. A key part of this is having an effective grievance mechanism that is accessible, predictable, and transparent, so that stakeholders have a clear channel for raising concerns and seeking remedy.

Tip: To help you assess the quality of your engagement, use the Stakeholder Inclusiveness Scorecard in the Appendices. This simple tool will help you to rate how well you are engaging with each of your stakeholder groups and to identify areas for improvement.

Bottom line: Authentic stakeholder engagement is not a PR exercise. It's a fundamental part of being a responsible and accountable organization. It's the only way to truly understand your impacts, to build trust with your stakeholders, and to create a GRI report that is both credible and meaningful.

Chapter 10

— Write Like a Human



Case Study: Microsoft's Audience-Aware Narrative (Still Traceable)

Microsoft pairs readable storytelling with clear governance and material topics—keeping the report engaging while traceable for verification.

Governance pages explain oversight of ESG topics; material issues are listed and linked to relevant disclosures, making it easy for different readers to navigate.

Plain language and structured index entries improve usability for broad audiences.

What You Can Learn:

- Balance readability with traceability.
- Explain governance roles over ESG topics.
- List material issues and link to disclosures.

For more, see: Microsoft — Responsible Corporate Reporting and Governance.

After all the hard work of identifying your impacts, collecting your data, and engaging with your stakeholders, it's finally time to write your report. But don't fall at the final hurdle. Your ESG report is a communication tool, not a data dump or a compliance document. To be effective, it needs to be readable, relatable, and tell a clear and compelling story. This chapter offers some simple tips to help you turn your dry disclosures into a narrative that will connect with your audience.

The most important rule of writing like a human is to be authentic and transparent. This means being honest about your performance, both the good and the bad. A report that only highlights your successes will come across as a marketing brochure and will lack credibility. Don't be afraid to talk about your challenges and the areas where you need to improve. This kind of transparency is what builds trust with your stakeholders. Use clear, simple language and avoid jargon and acronyms as much as possible. Where technical terms are unavoidable, be sure to explain them in plain English.

Bring your report to life with visuals and storytelling. A well-placed chart, graph, or image can often communicate complex information more effectively than a dense block of text. And don't be afraid to use storytelling techniques to make your report more engaging. Instead of just reporting on your safety statistics, for example, you could tell

the story of a specific safety initiative and the impact it has had on your employees.

Finally, make sure your report is accessible to all of your stakeholders. This means following web accessibility guidelines for any online versions of your report, using clear and legible fonts in your print version, and considering whether you need to provide translations for key stakeholder groups.

The more accessible your report is, the more people will be able to read it and engage with it.

Warning: It can be tempting to let your marketing department take over the writing of your ESG report. But this is a risky move. The goal of your report is to provide a balanced and accurate account of your performance, not to spin a purely positive story. Authenticity is far more powerful than polish. Keep your marketing team involved but make sure that the final product is a true and fair reflection of your organization.

Bottom line: Your GRI report is a powerful opportunity to communicate with your stakeholders and to build trust. Don't waste that opportunity by producing a report that is dry, dense, and unreadable. Write for your audience, not for your auditors. A report that is written in a clear, human voice and that honestly reflects your successes and your challenges will be far more effective at demonstrating your commitment to sustainability.

Part 4: Impacts, Risks, Metrics, and the Index

Chapter 11 — From Impacts to Action (GRI Management Approach)

Case Study: Nations Trust Bank Publishes GRI 3-3 Management Approach

Nations Trust Bank makes the ‘engine room’ visible by publishing per topic GRI 33 management approach disclosures (policies, actions, targets, evaluation).

The standalone document standardizes how each material topic is governed and measured, simplifying internal coordination and external review.

Stakeholders can verify commitments and progress across topics in one place.

What You Can Learn:

- Publish a GRI 3-3 reference for each material topic.
- Describe policies, actions, responsibilities, targets, and evaluation.
- Use the document as an internal control artifact too.

For more, see: Nations Trust Bank — GRI 3-3: Disclosures of Management Approach.

Identifying your material topics is a huge step, but it's only the beginning of the story. Now comes the crucial part: showing your stakeholders what you're actually doing about them. This is where the GRI Management Approach (Disclosure 3-3) comes into play. For every single material topic you've identified, you need to provide a clear and comprehensive narrative that explains how you are actively managing it. This isn't the place for vague promises or glossy photos; it's about demonstrating a complete, cyclical process of controls, remedies, and continuous improvement.

Think of your management approach as the "how" behind your ESG strategy. It's the engine room of your report, and it needs to be robust and well-oiled. Your narrative for each topic should clearly connect your actions to your impacts, and it should cover the following key elements:

Policies and Commitments: What are your company's stated commitments on this topic? This could be a formal, board-approved policy, a supplier code of conduct, or a public statement of your position. Be specific and, where possible, link to the actual documents.

Actions and Controls: What are the specific actions you are taking to manage the topic and its related impacts? This could include everything from employee training programs and operational procedures to supplier audits and community investment projects. This is your chance to get

specific and to show that you are taking concrete steps to put your policies into practice.

Resources and Responsibilities: Who is responsible for managing this topic? How are resources allocated? Showing that you have clear lines of responsibility and that you are dedicating resources to the issue will give your management approach much more credibility.

Targets and Tracking: How are you measuring your performance and tracking your progress? This is where you'll report on your key performance indicators (KPIs) and any targets you have set. Be sure to include your baseline year and to explain how you are tracking your progress over time.

Grievance and Remedy: How do you ensure that stakeholders who have been harmed by your impacts have access to effective remedy? This is a critical part of the management approach, and it's an area where many companies fall short. You need to describe your grievance mechanisms and explain how you are working to provide a remedy, either on your own or in cooperation with other actors.

Evaluation of Effectiveness: Finally, you need to explain how you are evaluating the effectiveness of your management approach. Are your actions having the desired effect? Are you on track to meet your targets? What have you learned, and

what are you doing to improve? This is the part of the management approach that closes the loop and demonstrates your commitment to continuous improvement.

Tip: To make your management approach disclosures more engaging and easier to understand, consider using a simple table for each material topic that maps out your policies, actions, targets, and responsibilities. This will not only help you to write a clearer narrative but will also serve as a practical internal management tool.

Bottom line: A strong management approach is what turns your materiality assessment from a theoretical exercise into a practical plan for action. It's the engine of your GRI report, and it's what will ultimately convince your stakeholders that you are serious about managing your impacts.

Chapter 12 — Metrics, Targets, and the GRI Content Index

Case Study: Two Solid Index Models—Allianz and Accenture

Allianz's 'in accordance' GRI Index and Accenture's 'with reference' Index show two credible ways to make disclosures traceable and reader friendly.

Allianz maps disclosures to Sustainability and Annual Reports; Accenture maps to the 360° Value Report and data tables.

Both models help reviewers find the right page fast—critical for assurance and benchmarking.

What You Can Learn:

- Choose a model that matches your maturity.
- Always provide exact page references in the Index.
- Keep your Index updated with each reporting cycle.

For more, see: Allianz GRI Content Index 2023; Accenture GRI Content Index 2024.

With your material topics identified and your management approaches described, it's time to get down to the nitty-gritty of your report: the metrics, targets, and the all-important GRI Content Index. This is where you'll provide the hard evidence that backs up your narrative and allows your stakeholders to assess your performance over time.

Your first task is to select the specific metrics you will use to report on your performance for each of your material topics. This is where the GRI Topic Standards come in. The Topic Standards provide a comprehensive set of indicators for a wide range of ESG topics, from energy and water to labor relations and human rights. For each of your material topics, you'll need to select the relevant indicators from the corresponding Topic Standard. For example, if "Energy" is one of your material topics, you'll use GRI 302: Energy to report on your energy consumption.

When you're reporting on your metrics, it's crucial to establish clear baselines and targets. A baseline is a starting point against which you can measure your progress. It's usually the first year for which you have reliable data. Targets are the specific, measurable goals you are aiming to achieve. They should be ambitious but realistic, and they should be linked to your overall sustainability strategy. You should also be sure to define any normalization methods you use.

Normalization is a way of putting your data into context by relating it to another metric, such as your revenue or your production volume. For example, instead of just reporting your absolute carbon emissions, you might also report your emissions per unit of production. This can help to provide a more accurate picture of your performance, especially if your company is growing.

Finally, you'll need to compile all of this information into the GRI Content Index. The Content Index is a mandatory part of any GRI report, and it serves as a roadmap for your readers, showing them exactly where to find each disclosure. It must be structured correctly, following the order of the GRI Standards, and it must include the title of each disclosure, the page number or section where it can be found, and any reasons for omission if a required disclosure is not provided. A complete and accurate Content Index is a hallmark of a credible and user-friendly GRI report.

Tip: Don't treat the Content Index as an afterthought. Build it as you go, and use it as a tool to track your progress and to identify any gaps in your reporting. To make your life easier, use the fillable template for the GRI Content Index in the Appendices of this book. We've also provided a worked example to show you what a completed index looks like.

Bottom line: Your metrics, targets, and Content Index are what provide the hard evidence to back up your sustainability story. They are the essential components that will make your report a transparent, credible, and useful tool for your stakeholders. Don't be afraid to get into the details here; this is what will ultimately show that you are walking the talk.

Part 5: Learning from Practice (Composite Snapshots)

Theory is great, but there's nothing like learning from the real-world experiences of others. In this part of the book, we'll move from the "what" and "how" of GRI reporting to the "what it looks like in practice." We've created three composite snapshots of different types of organizations and their GRI reporting journeys. These aren't real case studies of specific companies, but rather anonymized and blended examples that are based on our years of experience working with reporters of all shapes and sizes. They are designed to highlight common challenges and successful strategies, and to provide you with practical lessons that you can steal and adapt for your own reporting.

Chapter 13 — The Multi-Stakeholder Leader (A Composite Snapshot)

Case Study: Unilever's Long Running Supply Chain Transparency

Unilever's sustainability reporting—including a formal GRI Index—documents actions on supply chain issues like deforestation, enabling stakeholder verification.

The standards page details how Unilever reports with GRI; issue briefs and indexes point readers to specific commitments and performance.

Consistency over time strengthens trust with stakeholders across markets.

What You Can Learn:

- Maintain a standards page that explains frameworks used.
- Publish a GRI Index with links to issue briefs.
- Report supply chain actions with traceable evidence.

For more, see: Unilever — Sustainability reporting standards (GRI Index).

Our first snapshot is of a large, consumer-facing company with a complex global supply chain. This company had been publishing a sustainability report for years, but it was mostly a glossy marketing document that nobody really read. The new Head of Sustainability knew that they needed to do better. The key lesson from this composite is the power of deep and authentic stakeholder engagement. The company went beyond the usual online surveys and focus groups to establish ongoing, meaningful dialogue with a wide range of stakeholders, including workers in its supply chain, local communities in the countries where it operated, and even some of its most vocal activist critics. This engagement wasn't always easy or comfortable, but it provided the company with invaluable insights into its most significant impacts and helped it to build a more resilient and responsive sustainability strategy. This chapter will break down the specific engagement techniques that the company used, how it navigated the challenges of engaging with so-called "hostile" stakeholders, and how it translated the feedback it received into concrete actions and disclosures that transformed its report from a PR piece into a genuine tool for accountability.

Chapter 14 — The Sector-Savvy Mid-Market Player (A Composite Snapshot)

Case Study: Early Adopters of GRI Biodiversity Share Practical Lessons

CDL, Ecopetrol, Enel, JSW Steel, and Coca Cola HBC piloted GRI's Biodiversity Standard and shared how they integrate SBTN/TNFD with GRI materiality.

Case studies published by GRI describe initial approaches to using GRI 101: Biodiversity and how complementary frameworks were applied.

These examples help sector reporters sharpen disclosures on nature impacts.

What You Can Learn:

- Use Sector/Topic Standards to sharpen nature disclosures.
- Leverage complementary guidance (e.g., TNFD) alongside GRI.
- Document methods and target setting clearly.

For more, see: GRI News — Early adopters of GRI Biodiversity Standard; GRI & TNFD nature reporting guidance.

Our second snapshot is of a mid-market industrial company that was new to ESG reporting. The company was feeling overwhelmed by the sheer number of potential topics it could report on. The key takeaway from this composite is the importance of embracing sector-specific guidance to sharpen the focus of your report. By using the relevant GRI Sector Standard, the company was able to move beyond a generic list of ESG topics and to report on the issues that were most material to its industry. This not only made its report more relevant and valuable to its stakeholders, but it also helped the company to benchmark its performance against its peers and to identify new opportunities for improvement. This chapter will walk you through the process of how the company identified and adopted the relevant Sector Standard, and it will provide practical tips for how you can integrate a Sector Standard with the Universal and Topic Standards to create a report that is both comprehensive and focused.

Chapter 15 — The Mission-Driven Small Organization (A Composite Snapshot)

Case Study: Patagonia's Mission Driven Transparency

Patagonia publicly documents environmental and social responsibility across its supply chain—offering a practical template a mission driven organization can adapt for GRI.

The Footprint portal and annual Benefit Corporation Reports detail programs, performance, and supplier expectations—giving stakeholders practical visibility.

This approach demonstrates how purpose led firms can publish verifiable impact narratives.

What You Can Learn:

- Publish a supply chain responsibility portal with program details.
- Release an annual impact report that consolidates key data.
- Use preferred materials and supplier standards to reduce impacts.

For more, see: Patagonia — Environmental & Social Footprint; Benefit Corporation Report (FY2023–24).

Our final snapshot is of a small, mission-driven non-profit organization that was preparing its very

first GRI report. The organization had a tiny budget and an even tinier team. The lesson here is that proportionality is key. The organization knew that it couldn't compete with the glossy reports of large corporations, but it was able to produce a credible and impactful report by focusing on what mattered most. It used a lightweight, workshop-based materiality assessment to identify its most significant impacts, and then it used creative and low-cost methods to collect the necessary data, relying heavily on qualitative data and storytelling to bring its impacts to life. This composite demonstrates that GRI reporting is not just for large, well-resourced companies. With a smart, focused, and creative approach, even the smallest organizations can use the GRI Standards to tell their sustainability story in a powerful and compelling way.

Bottom line: These composite snapshots show that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to GRI reporting. The key is to understand the principles, to be clear about your impacts, and then to adapt the framework to fit your organization's unique context, resources, and goals. So, be inspired by these stories, but don't be afraid to forge your own path.

Part 6: Future-Proofing

Congratulations! You've published your GRI report. But don't put your feet up just yet. Your report is not a one-off project; it's a living document that should evolve and improve over time. The world of ESG is constantly changing, with new issues emerging, stakeholder expectations rising, and new regulations coming online. This final section of the book provides tools and strategies to help you future-proof your reporting, ensuring that it remains relevant, credible, and aligned with emerging best practices for years to come.

Chapter 16 — The GRI Maturity Assessment and Your Roadmap to Better Reporting

Case Study: National Grid's 'One-Stop' Reporting Maturity

National Grid's suite consolidates GRI Index, methodology, assurance statements, and policy links—hallmarks of a mature, review friendly reporting program.

The clear architecture shortens external review cycles and gives stakeholders confidence in process and data.

As frameworks evolve, the hub is updated to keep disclosures comparable.

What You Can Learn:

- Centralize report, index, methodology, and assurance.
- Keep links to key policies (e.g., Human Rights, Safety).
- Update the hub as standards evolve.

For more, see: National Grid — GRI Index (FY25) and Reporting Methodology 2023/24.

So, how good is your report, really? And how can you make it better? This chapter introduces a practical tool to help you answer these questions: the GRI Maturity Scorecard. This scorecard allows you to rate your reporting against a set of criteria across four levels of maturity, from “Beginner” to “Developing” to “Advanced” to “Leader.” By honestly assessing your current state, you can identify your strengths and weaknesses and create a clear roadmap for improvement. The scorecard is not a judgment tool, but a practical guide to help you prioritize your efforts and to plan your journey towards reporting excellence. This chapter will walk you through how to use the scorecard, how to involve your team in the assessment process, and how to translate your results into a concrete, year-ahead action plan. By regularly assessing your maturity, you can ensure that your reporting is on a path of continuous improvement.

Chapter 17

— Bridging to IFRS/ISSB S1/S2 (Without Losing Your GRI Soul)



Case Study: GRI's Double Materiality Keeps Impact Front and Centre

GRI's double materiality guidance helps reporters keep outward impacts transparent while enabling bridges to investor lenses as needed.

GRI's whitepaper frames impact and financial perspectives as distinct, complementary components; recent guidance on nature reporting shows how interoperability can work in practice.

Reporters maintain stakeholder trust by starting with impact materiality and mapping investor needs separately.

What You Can Learn:

- Start with impact materiality (GRI).
- Bridge to investor lenses without diluting stakeholders' view.
- Use nature guidance (e.g., TNFD) alongside GRI where relevant.

For more, see: GRI Whitepaper — Double Materiality; GRI News — GRI & TNFD advance nature reporting.

For many organizations, the reporting landscape is becoming more complex. You're not just being asked to report on your impacts on the world (the GRI approach); you're also being asked to report on how sustainability issues affect your financial performance (the IFRS/ISSB approach). This can feel like you're being asked to serve two masters. But it doesn't have to be that way. This chapter provides a practical guide to bridge the two standards without creating a lot of unnecessary work or losing the integrity of your GRI report. It offers a practical crosswalk that shows how your GRI-based data and disclosures can be leveraged to meet the requirements of IFRS S1 and S2. The key is to maintain disclosure hygiene, keeping your impact and financial materiality narratives separate and distinct, even when they are drawing on the same underlying data. This chapter will help you to navigate the dual-reporting challenge, avoiding the common trap of letting your reporting drift towards an investor-only focus and losing your GRI soul in the process.

Bottom line: Future-proofing your reporting is all about being proactive and strategic. It's about embracing a mindset of continuous improvement and staying on top of the evolving reporting landscape. By regularly assessing your maturity and by thoughtfully bridging to other standards, you can ensure that your GRI report remains a powerful tool for accountability, transparency, and value creation for years to come.

Part 7: The Part of Tens

Welcome to the home stretch! In the classic “For Dummies” tradition, we’re wrapping up with two quick-reference lists that are designed to be easily skimmable and to give you a rapid summary of some of the key takeaways from this book. Think of this as your cheat sheet for the cheat sheets.

First, we’ll look at the top ten mistakes that companies make in their GRI reports and how you can avoid them. Then, we’ll finish on a high note with a list of ten quick wins that will help you to get started on your reporting journey and to build momentum for the road ahead.

Chapter 18 — Ten GRI Reporting Mistakes (and How to Dodge Them)



Case Study: GRI Guidance Helps Reporters Avoid Greenwashing

GRI and regional practitioners emphasize verifiable claims, traceable boundaries, and assurance—useful checkpoints before publishing.

Applying GRI principles and documenting evidence pathways reduces reputational risk and improves comparability.

Legal-grade practices encourage consistent disclosure hygiene.

What You Can Learn:

- Verify claims and provide evidence links.
- Explain boundaries clearly in your report.
- Consider assurance for high risk metrics.

For more, see: GRI News — Essential practices to avoid greenwashing.

We've seen it all: the good, the bad, and the truly ugly of GRI reporting. This chapter is your guide to the most common errors that companies make, so that you can learn from their mistakes and save yourself time, effort, and potential damage to your credibility. Here's a sneak peek at a few of the mistakes we'll be covering:

The Materiality Muddle: Confusing impact materiality with financial materiality or choosing material topics based on what's easy to report on rather than what's truly significant.

The Data Dump: Overloading your report with endless tables of data without providing any context or narrative to explain what it all means.

The PR Puff Piece: Only reporting on the good news and ignoring or downplaying your negative impacts. This is the quickest way to lose credibility with your stakeholders.

The Boundary Blind Spot: Failing to consider the full boundary of your impacts and only reporting on what happens within your own four walls.

The Stakeholder Snooze: Treating stakeholder engagement as a check-the-box exercise rather than a genuine opportunity for dialogue and learning.

For each of these mistakes, we'll provide a simple, practical tip on how to dodge it and to get your reporting on the right track.

Chapter 19 — Ten Quick Wins for Beginners



Case Study: Quick Wins—GRI Content Index Template

GRI's free Content Index template helps first time reporters create a traceable roadmap of disclosures—fast.

The Excel template includes the revised Universal Standards and adapted Topic Standards, making it easy to customize and publish.

Using the template upfront reduces rework later.

What You Can Learn:

- Download the free GRI Content Index template.
- Customize it to match your material topics.
- Publish the Index alongside your report.

For more, see: GRI — Content Index Template (Resource Center).

Getting started with GRI reporting can feel overwhelming, but it doesn't have to be. This chapter provides a list of ten high-impact, low-effort actions that you can take to build momentum and to achieve some quick wins. These are practical steps that will help you to build a solid foundation for your reporting without getting bogged down in unnecessary complexity. Here are a few of the quick wins we'll be exploring:

Assemble Your A-Team: Build a cross-functional team to champion your GRI report from the inside.

Conduct a Mini-Materiality Workshop: Get your team in a room for a half-day workshop to create a draft list of your material topics.

Start a Simple Data Dictionary: You don't need fancy software. A simple spreadsheet can be a powerful tool for getting your data in order.

Map Your Stakeholders: Create a simple map of your key stakeholders and how you're currently engaging with them.

Tell One Good Story: Find one example of how you're making a positive impact and tell that story in a compelling way.

By tackling these quick wins, you'll not only make tangible progress on your report, but you'll also build the confidence and the internal support you need to succeed in the long run.

Appendices & Tools

This is where the rubber meets the road. We've packed these appendices with practical, hands-on tools that will help you to put the concepts in this book into practice. From a plain-English glossary to a set of fillable templates and our own "surprise" tools, these resources are designed to make your GRI reporting journey easier and more effective. So, roll up your sleeves and get ready to get to work.

Appendix A — Glossary (Plain English)

Impact materiality: The principle of identifying and reporting on the issues that represent an organization's most significant impacts on the economy, the environment, and people, including their human rights.

Financial materiality: The principle of identifying and reporting on the sustainability-related risks and opportunities that could reasonably be expected to affect a company's financial performance, enterprise value, and long-term viability.

Boundary: The scope of an organization's impacts, which can extend beyond its own operations to include its upstream and downstream value chain (e.g., suppliers, customers).

Management Approach (GRI 3-3): The narrative explanation of how an organization is managing each of its material topics. It includes a description of the organization's policies, actions, resources, targets, grievance mechanisms, and how it evaluates the effectiveness of its actions.

Due diligence: The process of identifying, preventing, mitigating, and accounting for how an organization addresses its adverse impacts on the economy, the environment, and people. It is a core expectation of the GRI Standards.

Grievance mechanism: A formal, accessible channel for stakeholders to raise concerns and seek remedy when they believe they have been adversely affected by an organization's activities.

Remediation: The actions taken to provide remedy to those who have been harmed by an organization's impacts. This can include apologies, restitution, rehabilitation, and financial or non-financial compensation.

Sustainability context: The practice of presenting an organization's performance in the broader context of the social, environmental, and economic conditions in which it operates.

Appendix B — GRI Maturity Self-Assessment (Scorecard)

Use this scorecard to assess the maturity of your GRI reporting and to identify areas for improvement. Score each criterion on a scale of 0 to 3 (0 = not in place; 1 = partially in place; 2 = substantially in place; 3 = fully in place and evidenced). Then, sum your scores to determine your maturity banding.

Banding: 12–20 Beginner • 21–32 Developing •
33–40 Advanced • 41–45 Leader

Appendix C — Templates

Template 1 — Impact-Based Materiality Workshop Agenda

Welcome & Purpose (10 min): Set the stage and explain the goals of the workshop.

Business & Value Chain Map (20 min): As a group, map out your organization's value chain, from raw material extraction to end-of-life.

Stakeholder Mapping (20 min): Brainstorm your key stakeholder groups and their interests.

Impact Inventory Breakout (30 min): In small groups, brainstorm your organization's potential impacts on the economy, the environment, and people.

Severity & Likelihood Scoring (30 min): As a group, assess the significance of each impact based on its severity and likelihood.

Boundary Tracing & Leverage Notes (20 min): For your most significant impacts, map out where they occur in your value chain and how much leverage you have to address them.

Draft 3-2 List, Validation & Next Steps (20 min): Based on your assessment, create a draft list of your material topics and agree on the next steps for validating it.

Template 2 — Stakeholder Mapping Grid

Template 3 — Data Dictionary Starter

Template 4 — GRI Content Index (Skeleton)

Template 5 — Sample GRI-Aligned ESG Policy (Outline)

Purpose & Scope: What is the purpose of this policy and who does it apply to?

Policy Commitments: What are your specific commitments, and how do they align with international norms (e.g., the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights)?

Governance & Responsibilities: Who is responsible for overseeing and implementing the policy?

Due Diligence Process: How do you identify, prevent, mitigate, and account for your impacts?

Stakeholder Engagement & Grievance Mechanisms: How do you engage with your stakeholders and provide access to remedy?

Disclosure, Assurance & Reporting Cadence: How will you report on your performance and ensure the credibility of your data?

Continuous Improvement & Review: How will you review and improve the policy over time?

Appendix D — Surprise Tools

Tool 1 — Impact Pathways (Fill-in Matrix)

This tool will help you to trace the connection between your activities and your impacts. For each of your material topics, fill in the matrix below.

Tool 2 — Green Claims Litmus Test (Checklist)

Before you make a bold environmental or social claim in your report, run it through this simple litmus test.

Tool 3 — Stakeholder Inclusiveness Scorecard

Use this scorecard to rate how well you are engaging with each of your stakeholder groups.

Tool 4 — Boundary Tracer (Topic-by-Topic)

This tool will help you to think through the boundaries of your impacts for each of your material topics.

Tool 5 — Supplier Impact Heatmap

Use this heatmap to prioritize your engagement with suppliers based on their potential impacts.

ESG Glossary and Key Terms

Assurance: Independent verification of the accuracy and completeness of sustainability disclosures.

Biodiversity: The variety of life in the world or in a particular habitat, often considered in ESG reporting for its role in ecosystem health.

Boundary: The scope of impacts considered in reporting, including upstream and downstream value chain.

CO2e (Carbon Dioxide Equivalent): A standard unit for measuring carbon footprints. It expresses the impact of different greenhouse gases (GHGs) in terms of the amount of CO2 that would create the same amount of warming.

Carbon Neutral: Having net zero carbon emissions, achieved by balancing emissions with carbon removal or offsetting.

Circular Economy: An economic system aimed at eliminating waste and the continual use of resources through recycling, reuse, and sustainable design.

Climate Risk: The potential negative impacts of climate change on an organization's operations, assets, or reputation.

Decarbonization: The process of reducing carbon emissions through changes in energy sources, efficiency, and technology.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI): Policies and practices that promote fair treatment, representation, and opportunity for all people.

Double Materiality: A concept recognizing that sustainability issues can be material both in terms of their impact on the organization and the organization's impact on society and the environment.

Due Diligence: Systematic process for identifying, preventing, mitigating, and accounting for adverse impacts.

ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance): A framework for evaluating an organization's impact on the environment, society, and its governance practices.

ESRS (European Sustainability Reporting Standards): EU standards for sustainability reporting, emphasizing double materiality.

Financial Materiality: Focuses on sustainability-related risks and opportunities that could affect financial performance.

GHG (Greenhouse Gas): Gases that trap heat in the atmosphere, contributing to global warming. Key GHGs include carbon dioxide (CO₂), methane (CH₄), nitrous oxide (N₂O), and fluorinated gases.

GRI (Global Reporting Initiative): The world's most widely used standards for sustainability reporting, helping organizations communicate their impacts.

Human Rights Due Diligence: The process of identifying, preventing, mitigating, and accounting for human rights impacts.

ISSB (International Sustainability Standards Board): A global standard-setter for sustainability-related financial disclosures, under the IFRS Foundation.

Impact Materiality: Focuses on the organization's most significant impacts on the economy, environment, and people.

KPI (Key Performance Indicator): A measurable value that demonstrates how effectively an organization is achieving key ESG objectives.

Management Approach (GRI 3-3): Narrative explanation of how an organization manages each material topic.

Materiality: The principle of identifying and reporting on issues that are most significant to an organization and its stakeholders.

Net Zero: Achieving a balance between the GHGs emitted and those removed from the atmosphere, typically through reduction and offsetting strategies.

Remediation: Actions taken to provide remedy to those harmed by an organization's impacts.

Renewable Energy: Energy from sources that are naturally replenished, such as solar, wind, hydro, and geothermal.

SASB (Sustainability Accounting Standards Board): Provides industry-specific standards for reporting financially material sustainability information.

SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals): 17 global goals set by the United Nations to address social, environmental, and economic challenges by 2030.

Scope 1 Emissions: Direct GHG emissions from owned or controlled sources (e.g., company vehicles, onsite fuel combustion).

Scope 2 Emissions: Indirect GHG emissions from the generation of purchased electricity, steam, heating, and cooling consumed by the reporting company.

Scope 3 Emissions: All other indirect emissions that occur in a company's value chain (e.g., purchased goods, transportation, waste, business travel).

Social License to Operate: Ongoing approval and acceptance of an organization's activities by its stakeholders and society at large.

Stakeholder Engagement: The process of involving those affected by or interested in the organization's activities.

Supply Chain Transparency: The practice of disclosing information about suppliers, sourcing, and practices throughout the value chain.

Sustainability Context: Presenting performance in the broader context of social, environmental, and economic conditions.

TCFD (Task Force on Climate-related Financial Disclosures): A framework for companies to disclose climate-related financial risks and opportunities.

TNFD (Taskforce on Nature-related Financial Disclosures): A framework for organizations to report and act on nature-related risks and opportunities.

Value Chain: The full range of activities, resources, and relationships involved in producing and delivering a product or service.

Waste Management: Strategies and processes for handling, reducing, and disposing of waste in an environmentally responsible manner.

Water Stress: The difficulty in accessing sufficient quantities of water for human and ecological needs, often reported as a material topic.

References and Resources

Official Standards and Guidance

GRI Standards Resource Center:

<https://www.globalreporting.org/standards/resource-center/>

IFRS Sustainability Disclosure Standards:

<https://www.ifrs.org/issued-standards/sustainability-standards/>

European Sustainability Reporting Standards (ESRS):

<https://www.efrag.org/Activities/2010050516553082/European-sustainability-reporting-standards>

Case Studies and Best Practices

Walmart FY2025 ESG Report — Ethics & Integrity
→ Corporate Governance and About Our Reporting

Accenture Global Reporting Initiative Content Index (2024)

Dow GRI Disclosure Report (2022/2023)

Allianz GRI Content Index 2023

National Grid — GRI Standards Content Index (FY25) and ESG Reporting Centre

- DuPont — 2025 GRI Content Index and Sustainability resources & downloads
- Unilever — Sustainability reporting standards (GRI Index)
- Patagonia — Environmental & Social Footprint; Benefit Corporation Report (FY2023–24)

Templates and Tools

GRI Content Index Template:
<https://www.globalreporting.org/standards/resource-center/>

Stakeholder Mapping Grid, Data Dictionary Starter, Impact-Based Materiality Workshop Agenda (see Appendices in this book)

Additional Reading

GRI Whitepaper — Double Materiality

GRI News — Essential practices to avoid greenwashing

GRI & TNFD nature reporting guidance