EIGHTH EDITION

FINANCIAL ACCOUNTING FOR DECISION MAKERS

Peter Atrill
Eddie McLaney

ALWAYS LEARNING

PEARSON

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Lecturer Resources

For password-protected online resources tailored to support the use of this textbook in teaching, please visit **www.pearsoned.co.uk/atrillmclaney**

ON THE WEBSITE

Preface

This text provides a comprehensive introduction to financial accounting. It is aimed both at students who are not majoring in accounting and at those who are. Those studying introductory-level financial accounting as part of their course in business, economics, hospitality management, tourism, engineering, or some other area, should find that the book provides complete coverage of the material at the level required. Students who are majoring in accounting should find the book a useful introduction to the main principles, which can serve as a foundation for further study.

The main focus of the text is on the ways in which financial statements and information can improve the quality of decision making. To ensure that readers understand the practical implications of the subject, there are, throughout the text, numerous illustrative extracts with commentary from company reports, survey data and other sources. Although some technical issues are dealt with in the text, the main emphasis throughout is on basic principles and underlying concepts.

In this eighth edition, we have taken the opportunity to make improvements, including those that have been suggested by students and lecturers who used the previous edition. We have introduced the subject of ethics in accounting, expanded the coverage of interim and segmental reports and included a section on summary financial statements. We have also rearranged some of the material so that topics flow more logically. We have also updated and expanded the number of examples from real life. We have also incorporated developments that have occurred with International Financial Reporting Standards, as well as developments that have arisen in the area of corporate governance.

The text is written in an 'open-learning' style. This means that there are numerous integrated activities, worked examples and questions throughout the text to help you to understand the subject fully. You are encouraged to interact with the material and to check your progress continually. Irrespective of whether you are using the book as part of a taught course or for personal study, we have found that this approach is more 'user-friendly' and makes it easier for you to learn.

We recognise that most of you will not have studied financial accounting before, and, therefore, we have tried to write in a concise and accessible style, minimising the use of technical jargon. We have also tried to introduce topics gradually, explaining everything as we go. Where technical terminology is unavoidable we try to provide clear explanations. In addition, you will find all of the key terms highlighted in the text, and then listed at the end of each chapter with a page reference. All of these key terms are also listed alphabetically, with a concise definition, in the glossary given in Appendix B. This should provide a convenient point of reference from which to revise.

A further important consideration in helping you to understand and absorb the topics covered is the design of the text itself. The page layout and colour scheme have been carefully considered to allow for the easy navigation and digestion of material. The layout features a large page format, an open design, and clear signposting of the various features and assessment material

We hope that you will find the book both readable and helpful.

Peter Atrill
Eddie McLaney

How to use this book

We have organised the chapters to reflect what we consider to be a logical sequence and, for this reason, we suggest that you work through the text in the order in which it is presented. We have tried to ensure that earlier chapters do not refer to concepts or terms that are not explained until a later chapter. If you work through the chapters in the 'wrong' order, you will probably encounter concepts and terms that were explained previously.

Irrespective of whether you are using the book as part of a lecture/tutorial-based course or as the basis for a more independent mode of study, we advocate following broadly the same approach.

Integrated assessment material

Interspersed throughout each chapter are numerous **activities.** You are strongly advised to attempt all of these questions. They are designed to simulate the sort of quick-fire questions that your lecturer might throw at you during a lecture or tutorial. Activities serve two purposes:

- to give you the opportunity to check that you understand what has been covered so far;
- to encourage you to think about the topic just covered, either to see a link between that topic and others with which you are already familiar, or to link the topic just covered to the next.

The answer to each activity is provided immediately after the question. This answer should be covered up until you have deduced your solution, which can then be compared with the one given.

Towards the end of Chapters 2–12 there is a **self-assessment question.** This is more comprehensive and demanding than most of the activities, and is designed to give you an opportunity to check and apply your understanding of the core coverage of the chapter. The solution to each of these questions is provided in Appendix C. As with the activities, it is important that you attempt each question thoroughly before referring to the solution. If you have difficulty with a self-assessment question, you should go over the relevant chapter again.

End-of-chapter assessment material

At the end of each chapter there are four **review questions.** These are short questions requiring a narrative answer or discussion within a tutorial group. They are intended to help you assess how well you can recall and critically evaluate the core terms and concepts covered in each chapter. Answers to these questions are provided in Appendix D at the end of the book.

At the end of each chapter, except for Chapter 1, there is a set of **exercises.** These are mostly computational and are designed to reinforce your knowledge and understanding. Exercises are graded as 'basic', 'intermediate' or 'advanced' according to their level of difficulty. The basic-level questions are fairly straightforward; the more advanced ones can be quite demanding but can be successfully completed if you have worked conscientiously through the chapter and have attempted the basic exercises. Solutions to some of the exercises in each chapter are provided in Appendix E. A coloured exercise number identifies these questions. Here, too, a thorough attempt should be made to answer each exercise before referring to the solution.

Solutions to the other exercises are provided in a separate *Instructors' Manual.*

Content and structure

The text comprises twelve main chapters. The market research for this text revealed a divergence of opinions, given the target market, on whether or not to include material on double-entry bookkeeping techniques. So as to not interrupt the flow and approach of the main chapters, Appendix A on recording financial transactions (including activities and three exercise questions) has been placed after Chapter 12.

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Figures

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION TO ACCOUNTING

INTRODUCTION

We begin this opening chapter of the book by considering the role of accounting. We shall see how accounting can be a valuable tool for decision making. We shall also identify the main users of accounting information and the qualities, or characteristics, needed for accounting information to be useful for decision-making purposes. We then go on to consider the two main strands of accounting: financial accounting and management accounting. We shall discuss the differences between them and why these differences arise.

Since this book is mainly concerned with accounting and financial decision making for private-sector businesses, we shall devote some time to examining the business environment. We consider the purpose of a private-sector business, the main forms of business enterprise that exist and the ways in which businesses may be structured. We also consider what the key financial objective of a business is likely to be. These are all important factors that help to shape the accounting and financial information produced.

Learning outcomes

When you have completed this chapter, you should be able to:

- explain the nature and role of accounting;
- identify the main users of financial information and discuss their needs;
- identify and discuss the qualities that make accounting information useful;
- explain the purpose of a business and describe how businesses are organised and structured.

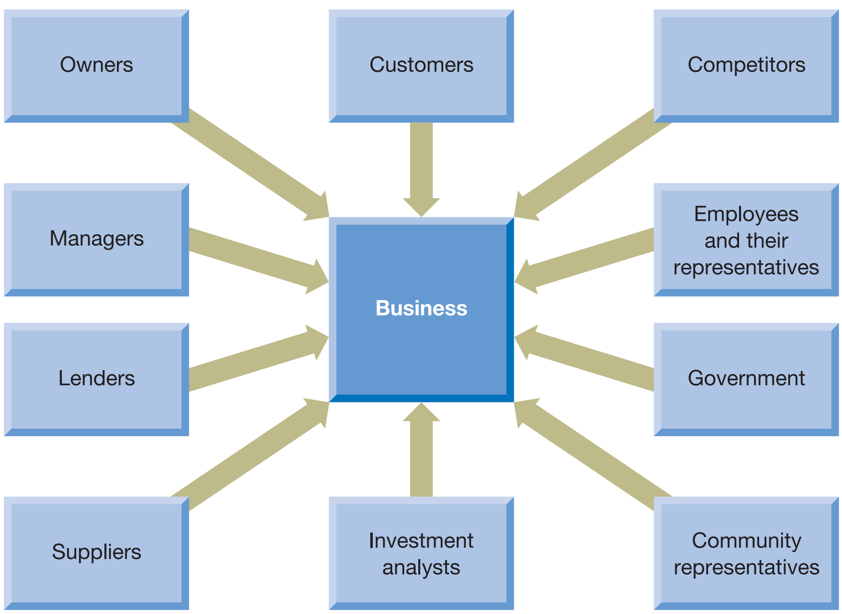
WHAT IS ACCOUNTING?

Accounting is concerned with *collecting*, *analysing* and *communicating* financial information. The ultimate aim is to help those using this information to make more informed decisions. If the financial information that is communicated is not capable of improving the quality of decisions made, there is really no point in producing it. We shall now consider the question of who uses financial information and for what kind of decisions it is useful.

Sometimes the impression is given that the purpose of accounting is simply to prepare financial (accounting) reports on a regular basis. While it is true that accountants undertake this kind of work, it does not represent an end in itself. As already mentioned, the ultimate aim of the accountant's work is to give users better financial information on which to base their decisions. This decision-making perspective of accounting fits in with the theme of this book and shapes the way in which we deal with each topic.

WHO ARE THE USERS OF ACCOUNTING INFORMATION?

For accounting information to be useful, the accountant must be clear *for whom* the information is being prepared and *for what purpose* the information will be used. There are likely to be various groups of people (known as 'user groups') with an interest in a particular organisation, in the sense of needing to make decisions about it. For the typical private-sector business, the more important of these groups are shown in Figure 1.1. Take a look at this figure and then try Activity 1.1.



Several user groups have an interest in accounting information relating to a business. The majority of these are outside the business but, nevertheless, have a stake in it. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list of potential users; however, the groups identified are normally the most important.

Figure 1.1 Main users of financial information relating to a business

Activity 1.1

Ptarmigan Insurance plc (PI) is a large motor insurance business. Taking the user groups identified in Figure 1.1, suggest, for each group, the sorts of decisions likely to be made about PI and the factors to be taken into account when making these decisions.

Your answer may be along the following lines:

User group	*Decision*
Customers	Whether to take further motor policies with PI. This might involve an assessment of PI's ability to continue in business and to meet customers' needs, particularly concerning any insurance claims made.
Competitors	How best to compete against PI or, perhaps, whether to leave the market on the grounds that it is not possible to compete profitably with the business. This might involve competitors using PI's performance in various respects as a 'benchmark' when evaluating their own performance. They might also try to assess PI's financial strength and to identify significant changes that may signal PI's future actions (for example, raising funds as a prelude to market expansion).
Employees	Whether to continue working for PI and, if so, whether to demand higher rewards for doing so. The future plans, profits and financial strength of the business are likely to be of particular interest when making these decisions.
Government	Whether PI should pay tax and, if so, how much, whether it complies with agreed pricing policies, whether financial support is needed and so on. In making these decisions, an assessment of PI's profits, sales revenues and financial strength would be made.
Community representatives	Whether to allow PI to expand its premises and/or whether to provide economic support for the business. When making such decisions, PI's ability to continue to provide employment for the community, the extent to which it uses community resources and its willingness to fund environmental improvements are likely to be important considerations.
Investment analysts	Whether to advise clients to invest in PI. This would involve an assessment of the likely risks and future returns associated with PI.
Suppliers	Whether to continue to supply PI with goods or services and, if so, whether to supply these on credit. This would involve an assessment of PI's ability to pay for any goods or services supplied.
Lenders	Whether to lend money to PI and/or whether to require repayment of any existing loans. PI's ability to pay the interest and to repay the principal sum would be important factors in such decisions.
Managers	Whether the performance of the business needs to be improved. Performance to date may be compared with earlier plans or some other 'benchmark' to decide whether action needs to be taken. Managers may also wish to consider a change in PI's future direction. This may involve determining whether the business has the flexibility and resources to take on new challenges
Owners	Whether to invest more in PI or to sell all, or part, of the investment currently held. This would involve an assessment of the likely risks and returns associated with PI. Owners may also be involved with decisions on rewarding senior managers. When making these decisions, the financial performance of the business would normally be taken into account.

Although this answer covers many of the key points, you may have identified other decisions and/or other factors to be taken into account by each group.

THE CONFLICTING INTERESTS OF USERS

We have just seen that each user group will have its own particular interests. There is always a risk, however, that the interests of the various user groups will collide. The distribution of business wealth provides the most likely area for collisions to take place. Let us take the example of owners and managers. Although managers are appointed to act in the best interests of the owners, they may not always do so. Instead, they may use the wealth of the business to award themselves large pay rises, to furnish large offices or to buy expensive cars for their own use. Accounting can play an important role in monitoring and reporting how various groups benefit from the business. Thus, owners may rely on accounting information to see whether pay and benefits received by managers are appropriate and are in line with agreed policies.

There is also a potential collision of interest between lenders and owners. Funds loaned to a business, for example, may not be used for their intended purpose. They may be withdrawn by the owners for their own use rather than used to expand the business as agreed. Lenders may, therefore, rely on accounting information to see whether the owners have kept to the terms of the loan agreement.

Activity 1.2

Can you think of other examples where accounting information may be relied upon by a user group to check whether the distribution of business wealth is appropriate and/or in accordance with particular agreements?

Two possible examples that spring to mind are:

- employees wishing to check that they are receiving a 'fair share' of the wealth created by the business and that managers are complying with agreed profit-sharing schemes;
- governments wishing to check that the owners of a monopoly do not benefit from excessive profits and that any pricing rules concerning the monopoly's goods or services have not been broken.

You may have thought of other examples.

HOW USEFUL IS ACCOUNTING INFORMATION?

No one would seriously claim that accounting information fully meets all of the needs of each of the various user groups. Accounting is still a developing subject and we still have much to learn about user needs and the ways in which these needs should be met. Nevertheless, the information contained in accounting reports should help users make decisions relating to the business. The information should reduce uncertainty about the financial position and performance of the business. It should help to answer questions concerning the availability of funds to pay owners a return, to repay loans, to reward employees and so on.

Typically, there is no close substitute for the information provided by the financial statements. Thus, if users cannot glean the required information from the financial statements, it is often unavailable to them. Other sources of information concerning the financial health of a business are normally much less useful.

Activity 1.3

What other sources of information might, say, an investment analyst use in an attempt to gain an impression of the financial position and performance of a business? (Try to think of at least four.) What kind of information might be gleaned from these sources?

Other sources of information available include:

- meetings with managers of the business;
- public announcements made by the business;
- newspaper and magazine articles;
- websites, including the website of the business;
- radio and TV reports;
- information-gathering agencies (for example, agencies that assess the creditworthiness or credit ratings of the business);
- industry reports; and
- economy-wide reports.

These sources can provide information on various aspects of the business, such as new products or services being offered, management changes, new contracts offered or awarded, the competitive environment within which the business operates, the impact of new technology, changes in legislation, changes in interest rates, and future levels of inflation.

The kind of information identified above is not really a substitute for accounting information. Rather, it is best used in conjunction with accounting information to provide a clearer picture of the financial health of a business.

Evidence on the usefulness of accounting

There are arguments and convincing evidence that accounting information is at least *perceived* as being useful to users. Numerous research surveys have asked users to rank the importance of accounting information, in relation to other sources of information, for decision-making purposes. Generally, these studies have found that users rank accounting information very highly. There is also considerable evidence that businesses choose to produce accounting information that exceeds the minimum requirements imposed by accounting regulations. (For example, businesses often produce a considerable amount of accounting information for managers that is not required by any regulations.) Presumably, the cost of producing this additional accounting information is justified on the grounds that users find it useful. Such arguments and evidence, however, leave unanswered the question of whether the information produced is actually used for decision-making purposes, that is: does it affect people's behaviour?

It is normally very difficult to assess the impact of accounting on decision making. One situation arises, however, where the impact of accounting information can be observed and measured. This is where the **shares** (portions of ownership of a business) are traded on a stock exchange. The evidence reveals that, when a business makes an announcement concerning its accounting profits, the prices at which shares are traded and the volume of shares traded often change significantly. This suggests that investors are changing their views about the future prospects of the business as a result of this new information becoming available to them and that this, in turn, leads them to make a decision either to buy or to sell shares in the business.

While there is evidence that accounting reports are seen as useful and are used for decision-making purposes, it is impossible to measure just how useful they really are to users. We cannot say with certainty whether the cost of producing these reports represents value for money. Accounting reports will usually represent only one input to a particular decision. The weight attached to them by the decision maker, and the resulting benefits, cannot be accurately assessed.

It is possible, however, to identify the kinds of qualities which accounting information must possess in order to be useful. Where these qualities are lacking, the usefulness of the information will be diminished. We shall now consider this point in more detail.

PROVIDING A SERVICE

One way of viewing accounting is as a form of service. The user groups identified in Figure 1.1 can be seen as the 'clients' and the accounting (financial) information produced can be seen as the service provided. The value of this service to the various 'clients' can be judged according to whether the accounting information meets their needs.

To be useful to users, the information provided must possess certain qualities, or characteristics. In particular, it must be relevant and it must faithfully represent what it is supposed to represent. These two qualities, **relevance** and **faithful representation**, are regarded as fundamental qualities and are now explained in more detail.

- *Relevance* Accounting information should make a difference. That is, it should be capable of influencing user decisions. To do this, it must help to *predict future events* (such as predicting next year's profit), or help to *confirm past events* (such as establishing last year's profit), or do both. By confirming past events, users can check on the accuracy of their earlier predictions. This can, in turn, help them to improve the ways in which they make predictions in the future.

  To be relevant, accounting information must cross a threshold of **materiality**. An item of information is considered material, or significant, if its omission or misstatement would alter the decisions that users make.

Activity 1.4

Do you think that what is material for one business will also be material for all other businesses?

No, it will normally vary from one business to the next. What is material will depend on factors such as the size of the business, the nature of the information and the amounts involved.

Ultimately, what is considered material is a matter of judgement. In making this judgement, managers should consider how this information is likely to be used by the various user groups. Where a piece of information is not considered to be material, it should not be included within the accounting reports. It will merely clutter them up and, perhaps, interfere with the users' ability to interpret them.

- *Faithful representation* Accounting information should represent what it is supposed to represent. To do this, the information should be *complete.* In other words, it should contain all of the information needed to understand what is being portrayed. It should also be *neutral,* which means that the information should be presented and selected without bias. Finally, it should be *free from error.* This is not the same as saying that it must always be perfectly accurate; this is not really possible. Estimates may have to be made which eventually turn out to be inaccurate. It does mean, however, that there should be no errors in the way in which these estimates have been prepared and described. In practice, a piece of accounting information may not reflect perfectly these three aspects of faithful representation. It should try to do so, however, insofar as is possible.

Accounting information must contain *both* of these fundamental qualities if it is to be useful. There is little point in producing information that is relevant, but which lacks faithful representation, or producing information that is irrelevant, even if it is faithfully represented.

Further qualities

Where accounting information is both relevant and faithfully represented, there are other qualities that, if present, can enhance its usefulness. These are **comparability**, **verifiability**, **timeliness** and **understandability**. Each of these qualities is now considered.

- *Comparability.* Users of accounting information often want to make comparisons. They may want to compare performance of the business over time (for example, profit this year compared to last year). They may also want to compare certain aspects of business performance (such as the level of sales achieved during the year) to those of similar businesses. Better comparisons can be made where the accounting system treats items that are basically the same in the same way and where policies for measuring and presenting accounting information are made clear.
- *Verifiability.* This quality provides assurance to users that the accounting information provided faithfully represents what it is supposed to represent. Accounting information is verifiable where different, independent experts would be able to agree that it provides a faithful portrayal. Verifiable information tends to be supported by evidence.
- *Timeliness.* Accounting information should be produced in time for users to make their decisions. A lack of timeliness will undermine the usefulness of the information. Normally, the later accounting information is produced, the less useful it becomes.
- *Understandability.* Accounting information should be set out as clearly and concisely as possible. It should also be understood by those at whom the information is aimed.

Activity 1.5

Do you think that accounting reports should be understandable to those who have not studied accounting?

It would be very useful if everyone could understand accounting reports. This, however, is unrealistic as complex financial events and transactions cannot normally be expressed in simple terms.

It is probably best that we regard accounting reports in the same way that we regard a report written in a foreign language. To understand either of these, we need to have had some preparation. When producing accounting reports, it is normally assumed that the user not only has a reasonable knowledge of business and accounting but is also prepared to invest some time in studying the reports. Nevertheless, the onus is clearly on accountants to provide information in a way that makes it as understandable as possible to non-accountants.

It is worth emphasising that the four qualities just discussed cannot make accounting information useful. They can only enhance the usefulness of information that is already relevant and faithfully represented.

WEIGHING UP THE COSTS AND BENEFITS

Even when an item of accounting information may have all the qualities described, this does not automatically mean that it should be collected and reported to users. There is still one more hurdle to jump. Consider Activity 1.6.

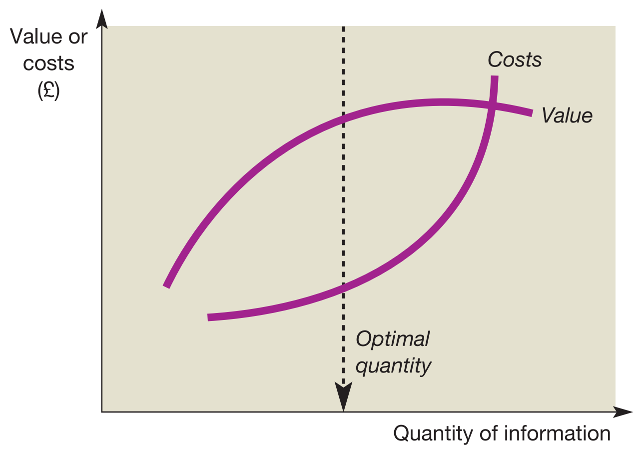
Activity 1.6

Suppose an item of information is capable of being provided. It is relevant to a particular decision and can be faithfully represented. It is also comparable, verifiable and timely, and can be understood by the decision maker.

Can you think of the reason why, in practice, you might choose not to produce the information?

The reason is that you judge the cost of doing so to be greater than the potential benefit of having the information. This cost–benefit issue will limit the amount of accounting information provided.

In theory, a particular item of accounting information should only be produced if the costs of providing it are less than the benefits, or value, to be derived from its use. Figure 1.2 shows the relationship between the costs and value of providing additional accounting information.



The benefits of accounting information eventually decline. The cost of providing information, however, will rise with each additional piece of information. The optimal level of information provision is where the gap between the value of the information and the cost of providing it is at its greatest.

Figure 1.2 Relationship between costs and the value of providing additional accounting information

The figure shows how the value of information received by the decision maker eventually begins to decline. This is, perhaps, because additional information becomes less relevant, or because of the problems that a decision maker may have in processing the sheer quantity of information provided. The costs of providing the information, however, will increase with each additional piece of information. The broken line indicates the point at which the gap between the value of information and the cost of providing that information is at its greatest. This represents the optimal amount of information that can be provided. This theoretical model, however, poses a number of problems in practice.

To illustrate the practical problems of establishing the value of information, let us assume that we accidentally reversed our car into a wall in a car park. This resulted in a dented boot and scraped paintwork. We want to have the dent taken out and the paintwork re-sprayed at a local garage. We know that the nearest garage would charge £350 but we believe that other local garages may offer to do the job for a lower price. The only way of finding out the prices at other garages is to visit them, so that they can see the extent of the damage. Visiting the garages will involve using some fuel and will take up some of our time. Is it worth the cost of finding out the price for the job at the various local garages? The answer, as we have seen, is that if the cost of discovering the price is less than the potential benefit, it is worth having that information.

To identify the various prices for the job, there are several points to be considered, including:

- How many garages shall we visit?
- What is the cost of fuel to visit each garage?
- How long will it take to make all the garage visits?
- At what price do we value our time?

The economic benefit of having the information on the price of the job is probably even harder to assess. The following points need to be considered:

- What is the cheapest price that we might be quoted for the job?
- How likely is it that we shall be quoted a price cheaper than £350?

As we can imagine, the answers to these questions may be far from clear – remember that we have only contacted the local garage so far. When assessing the value of accounting information we are confronted with similar problems.

Producing accounting information can be very costly. The costs, however, are often difficult to quantify. Direct, out-of-pocket costs, such as salaries of accounting staff, are not usually a problem, but these are only part of the total costs involved. There are other costs such as the cost of users' time spent on analysing and interpreting the information provided.

Activity 1.7

What about the economic benefits of producing accounting information? Do you think it is easier, or harder, to assess the economic benefits of accounting information than to assess the costs of producing it?

It is normally much harder to assess the benefits. We saw earlier that, even if we could accurately measure the economic benefits arising from a particular decision, we must bear in mind that accounting information will be only one factor influencing that decision. Other factors will also be taken into account.