

# A Guide to Writing an Effective Executive Summary





# MISSION

Ensure Navy and Marine Corps readiness through **leadership in prevention of disease** and **promotion of health.**

## Introduction

Communicating health and environmental information can be challenging for any number of reasons. Occasionally, our audiences may lack a scientific understanding and have a general distrust of the government. Risk Communication theory provides guidance for developing and presenting scientific information in a way that non-technical audiences will better understand and are more likely to accept.

The Navy and Marine Corps Public Health Center's (NMCPHC) Environmental Programs Department has been the Navy's subject matter expert for Risk Communication since its inception in 1991. This booklet is one of several products developed by NMCPHC to help Navy scientists and engineers communicate effectively with non-technical audiences.

## WHAT is an executive summary?

- A technical report is often the result of extensive research, testing, analysis and writing. The results are important and the conclusions or recommendations may affect an entire community, change the way we do things, or lead to further studies or investigations. It is up to you, the expert, to help others understand your technical report.

- Public right-to-know legislation means that part of your job is to communicate important information to all of your stakeholders. For your report to be useful, it has to be accessible to many audiences. The Navy, Federal, State, and local Government-regulators, or the public may make important

decisions based on your report. Before that can happen, they need to be able to fully understand your methodology, conclusions and recommendations.

A simple and clear executive summary can help non-technical and technical audiences better understand your report. An effective executive summary should consider the audience and give readers a quick summary of the report's content.

Your goal is to write an executive summary that is logical, clear and interesting, and helps build your trust and credibility with your audiences. The next few pages of this booklet will help you meet that goal.

## WHEN do I need an executive summary?

Executive summaries are an important part of many documents. Ideally, an executive summary should be a part of any report or document that is lengthy, complicated or highly technical.

Executive summaries are usually the first section of many different documents including:

- Technical reports
- Research papers
- Academic articles
- Scientific reports
- Environmental studies
- Health risk assessments

Executive summaries are also great tools when complex reports need to be presented to a number of different audiences including:

- General public
- Governing agencies
- Regulators
- Media
- Managers
- Other audiences who may not have the expertise to understand all of the content of a highly technical report

In fact, some organizations send an executive summary instead of a complete report when there is a large audience interested in the report. The audience can read the executive summary and then request a copy of the complete report if they want more information.

This approach can save resources on photocopying and distribution, while providing important information to audiences that might not read a complex or lengthy report.

## WHY do I need an executive summary?

The purpose of an executive summary is to consolidate the principal points of a document in one place.

An executive summary should be written so that any reader, regardless of their technical knowledge, can understand the contents of the report and the relevance of the findings and recommendations.

Typically, the executive summary is a tool to give readers an overview of the document, its purpose and main conclusion.

Since important decisions are often made from these reports, the executive summary is a tool to provide relevant information for decision making to an audience that may not have the time or technical expertise to read and understand the entire report.

An executive summary can provide a quick read and enough information to understand the contents and relevance of the report.



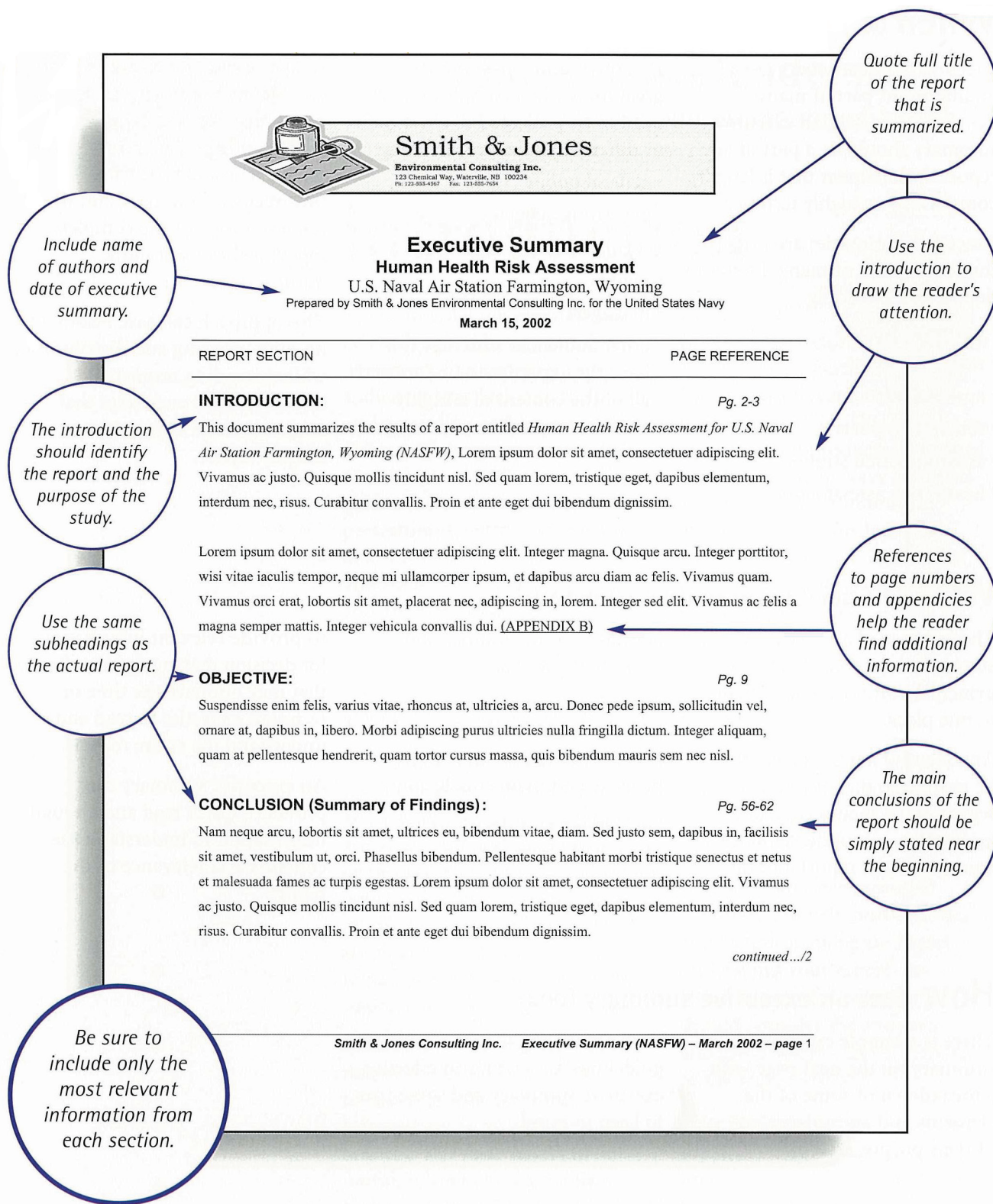
## HOW does an executive summary look?

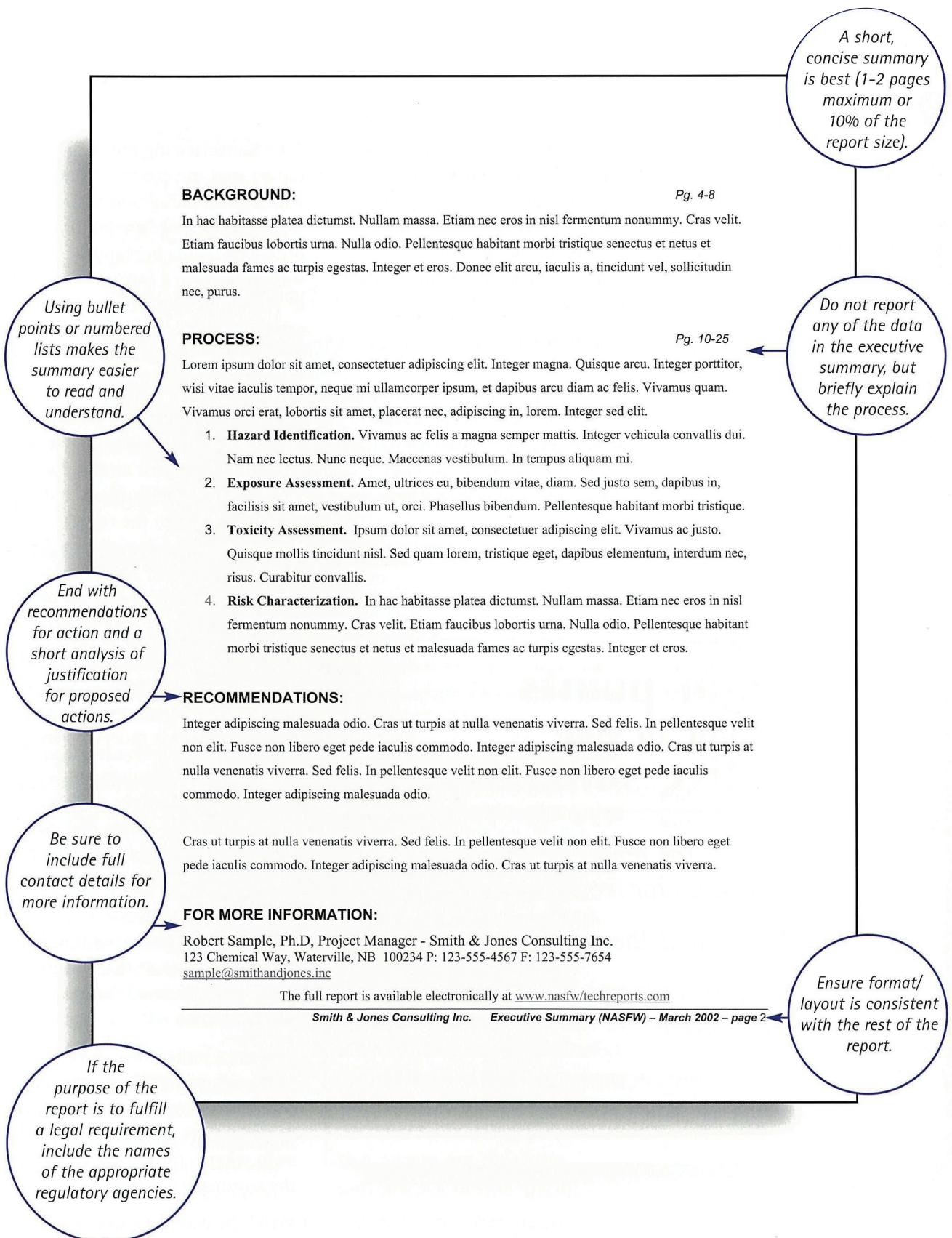
There is a sample executive summary on the next page with a breakdown of some of the elements and an explanation of their purpose.

In the following sections, there are guidelines for writing an effective executive summary and some tips to keep in mind.



# Sample of an Executive Summary







# How Do I Write an Executive Summary?

## 1 Content

An effective executive summary should be written using language that the intended audience can understand and read independently from the report. It should briefly summarize every main section of the report and include references to the main document (i.e., appendices or page numbers) that direct readers if they require more detailed information.

The executive summary should begin with a concise summary of the conclusion reached within the report.

The executive summary does not report any of the data, but briefly

explains the methodology and results. References to the main document can be used to direct readers to data charts should they wish more information.

Summarize the purpose of the report, the problem addressed and the findings and recommendations in concise and plain language. Where technical language is necessary, be sure to include definitions and explanations.

After summarizing the entire report, end the executive summary with a short paragraph that explains any recommendations for action. This paragraph should provide a short analysis

or justification for the proposed action in terms the audience will consider important (i.e., health, monetary, or ethical).

An executive summary should be less technical in terminology than the complete report and include all of the relevant findings and information from the report. While it can be a daunting task to reduce a lengthy report to a compact form, there are tips to help determine the best approach:

- Use the report's title and subheadings as a useful tool for organizing the summary and deciding what is most important.
- Look at the beginning and ending of paragraphs for key points. Scan for words that alert the reader to important elements, such as first, finally, therefore, and principal.
- Highlight key points within the body of the report that outline the purpose/central theme of the report.
- Prepare a bullet form outline of the summary. Then, edit the outline to eliminate secondary or minor points. Use your judgment as to what is important, but keep the summary concise.
- Write the executive summary in your own words, using a professional but plainspoken style.

### Four major points to include in your executive summary:

- 1 ***A summary of the report's main conclusions and justification for recommendations***
- 2 ***An explanation of the problem studied***
- 3 ***A summary of the process used to study the problem***
- 4 ***An outline of the recommendations or decisions***



## Questions to ask yourself as you write an executive summary:

*What is the report about?*

*Why is it important?*

*What is the main idea in each section?*

*What research was done to address the problem?*

*How does the research support the conclusion and recommendations?*

## 2 Style

An effective executive summary should be written in plain language that the intended audience can understand.

### ***Avoid industry/technical jargon:***

Technical words and phrases that you use everyday can confuse and frustrate a non-technical audience. Avoid technical terms wherever possible. When they cannot be avoided, include a clear and simple definition in the executive summary. Or better yet, substitute the definition for the word.

### ***Keep sentences short and to the point:***

Read over long and complicated sentences in the summary and determine the main idea. Rewrite the sentences by separating different ideas into shorter sentences. Your goal is to ensure

the main point is simple to understand and immediately apparent.

### ***Replace complex words with simple, everyday words:***

Write your executive summary as if you were explaining your report to a student in 8th grade. You can replace words like 'accomplish', 'optimum' and 'strategize' with words like 'do', 'best' and 'plan' without oversimplifying the content. Most of the common word processing software, such as Microsoft Word and WordPerfect contain features that will evaluate the reading grade level of your document.

### ***Use acronyms carefully and always define them:***

Although acronyms are common in the military and technical fields,

the public is usually unfamiliar with them and the concepts they define. Avoid using acronyms when possible, especially in the executive summary because they can confuse and intimidate your audience. When they are used, be sure to define acronyms the first time they are used in a document. Keep in mind that someone unfamiliar with the acronym is likely to forget it quickly, so only use it if it is found repeatedly throughout the document. Also, remember to be consistent with the style you use for acronyms throughout the entire document (i.e., D.O.D., DoD, DOD).

### ***Use an appropriate tone:***

Avoid using vague or emotional language. Instead, stick to the facts and avoid confusing statements. See the examples of page 7.

# How Do I Write an Executive Summary?

## Real life examples

*Avoid industry jargon and keep sentences short and simple:*

**Instead of...** "Baseline psychometric testing will be conducted prior to the administration of the medication, followed by a repeat assessment after drug administration, in order to determine whether there are any objectively measurable neuropsychiatric efforts associated with this drug."

**Consider...** "The drug will be tested for side effects."

*Replace complex words with simple, everyday words:*

**Instead of...** "Following revegetation, any disturbed areas will be reoccupied by a like assemblage of alien avian and mammalian species."

**Consider...** "After the plants grow back, the birds and animals will return."

*Use an appropriate tone:*

**Instead of...** "You cannot claim your expenses for outside accommodation or meals, unless you can prove you did not have access to quarters and rations on the base."

**Consider...** "You can claim expenses if accommodations and meals are not available on base. Please keep your receipts."





### 3 Format

Since an executive summary is usually the first section of a report, it should be formatted consistently with the document it summarizes. Here are some guidelines to help format an executive summary:

#### **Length**

Ideally, an executive summary should be one or two pages long with a maximum of three pages. However, in some instances, a longer technical summary may be necessary. When necessary, the technical summary should be a maximum of 10% of the report it summarizes (a 100-page report may be summarized in 10 pages). The shorter, three page maximum, executive summary should still be included.

#### **Titles**

Title your document EXECUTIVE SUMMARY and center the title two inches from the top of the page. Include the exact name of the report immediately below it.

Subheadings for each section in the executive summary will help enhance its readability. Use the same subheadings as the report and provide a brief explanation of the most important information from each section.

The elements included in an executive summary, and the amount of space dedicated to each element, will depend on the purpose and nature of the document.

The following is a list of elements that may be included in an executive summary.

1. Purpose and scope of report – Objective
2. Conclusion or Summary of Findings
3. Background
4. Process
5. Recommendations
6. Other supporting information

#### **Paragraphs**

Keep paragraphs short and summarize multiple ideas within a paragraph as bullet points or a numbered list. This will enhance the readability of the summary and allow readers to digest complex information.

#### **Fonts and Spacing**

Because it is the first section, the executive summary should have the same general look as the rest of the report. Use the same font type for the body of the executive summary as in the report.

Make sure the font size is at least 12 pitch and that paragraphs are double-spaced between each section so that the document is easy to read.

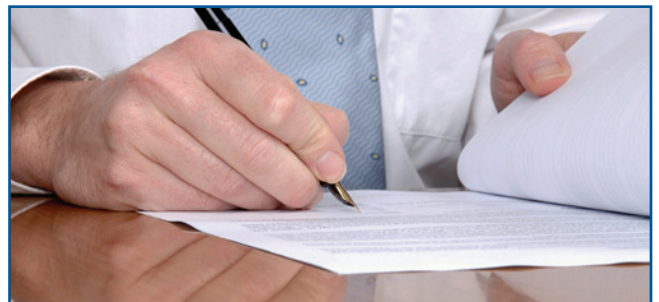
#### **Contact Information**

In addition to the full name of the report at the top of the executive summary, be sure to include the date, name of the authors and their organization as well as the name of the organization that commissioned the report.

At the bottom of the executive summary, provide the following information:

- Contact name
- Phone number
- Mailing address
- E-mail address
- Website address where the full report may be available

The contact name can be the point of contact from the organization that commissioned the report or the authors of the report. This name should be included so that readers can follow up if they have any questions or want copies of the entire report. If the purpose of the report is to fulfill a legal requirement, include the names of the appropriate regulatory agencies (i.e., this report has been submitted to the Environmental Protection Agency).



# How Do I Know When I am Finished?

## 4 Review and Edit

### ***Proof Read and Simplify***

Once the draft executive summary is finished, be sure to proof read and spell check the document. Read the summary over again carefully, keeping in mind the 8th grade reading level recommendation. Look for any complex terms or sentences that should be edited and unnecessary information that can be removed.

### ***Double-check the Accuracy***

The authors of the report should always review the executive summary to ensure you have accurately captured the main points and correctly interpreted the conclusions and recommendations in the executive summary.

### ***Test your Summary***

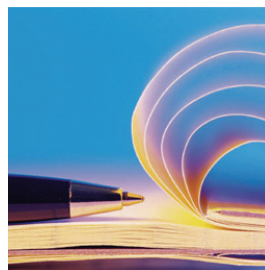
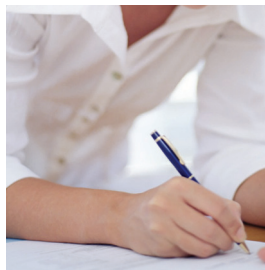
Keeping confidentiality and security issues in mind, ask someone who is not familiar with the report, and does not have a technical background, to review the executive summary. They can tell you if the executive summary is clear and understandable to an unfamiliar audience. This extra step will help ensure that the executive summary can communicate independently of the report.

## Top Ten Tips

- 1 ***Keep it simple***
- 2 ***Keep it short***
- 3 ***Avoid technical language, jargon, and acronyms***
- 4 ***Use subheadings and bullet points***
- 5 ***Highlight main points***
- 6 ***Provide conclusions and recommendations***
- 7 ***Consider your audience***
- 8 ***Avoid confusing or emotional language***
- 9 ***Proof read and spell check***
- 10 ***Be logical, clear and interesting***

# Where Can I Get More Information?

Please contact the **Navy and Marine Corps Public Health Center** for additional information or assistance.



Visit our website at:

[http://www-nmcphc.med.navy.mil/Environmental\\_Health/](http://www-nmcphc.med.navy.mil/Environmental_Health/)

## Other risk communication publications and services available from NMCPHC

- Risk Communication Primer
- Guide to Hosting a Public Meeting
- Fact Sheet & Press release Preparation
- Development of Posters and Visual Media for Scientific Technical Information
- Correspondence Development/Review
- Health and Environmental Risk Communication Training Workshops
- Community Outreach Services (Technical Posters)
- Technical Posters Review and Development
- Verbal Communication Development and Facilitation Services



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