

EXECUTIVE SUMMARIES

An executive summary briefly summarizes the purpose, results, and conclusions of your work for a non-technical audience, often managers or executives who may never read the full document. This audience is not generally interested in the technical details of a project; rather, they are usually most concerned with the financial, administrative, and marketing implications of your work.

Executive Summaries vs. Abstracts

Executive summaries and abstracts are similar in that each is a condensed version of a longer document, and each appears before the full version of the document; however, there are important differences between the two. Most abstracts have only 250-500 words, but an executive summary is generally 1 or 2 double-spaced pages, or about 5% of the length of the report. An abstract is generally written for an audience with technical expertise and an interest in details of the problem, methodology, and results; an executive summary is written primarily for administrators who may be unfamiliar with the terminology of the field and whose interests lie primarily in the business implications of the work. Thus, it will focus on issues related to budgets, marketing, and administration.

Style

Like the report itself, an executive summary adopts a formal tone and uses clear, concise language. For the sake of brevity, it omits lengthy discussion of background, examples, or case studies. It minimizes the use of technical language, and defines those technical terms that are unavoidable. Never prepare an executive summary by copying and pasting sentences from the main document; the results of this approach are sloppy and incomplete at best and unintelligible at worst.

Introduce the Problem

Often, an executive summary must be persuasive; therefore, begin by introducing the problem with straightforward language that will capture a reader's attention. Avoid complex or technical background information. Begin with a clear idea of what your work accomplishes:

Ex. For those who are injured or ill, spending hours in a waiting room is more than merely frustrating; it can be exhausting, painful, and even dangerous. If ABC Clinic is unable to implement effective triage and admissions procedures to cope with increasing numbers of patients, such waits will only grow longer, driving patients to seek care from our competitors.

Once you have introduced the problem, explain how your work contributes to the solution. Be specific.

Ex. In 2012, ABC Clinic employed 23 nurses and served an average of 200 patients per week. To handle the patient volume of 600 per week projected by late 2015, we must recruit at least 10 additional registered nurses each year and another 16-18 licensed practical nurses. Our budget can accommodate these numbers; however, recruiting efforts generally result in a pool of only 12-15 qualified applicants each year for nursing positions. We must at least double the size of this pool without reducing the educational and professional qualifications we demand of our nursing staff.

Sell the Solution

Once you have explained the problem, present the solution. If the original report explains the methods used to address the problem, and if those methods were a significant factor in developing the solution, or if they are likely to be important to executive readers, then describe them briefly. If, for example, you are suggesting a change in recruiting methods, you might want to explain the steps you took to discover the most effective methods.

Your next step is to sell your solution, providing as many specifics as possible.

Ex. “The improved recruitment plan is expected to increase the number of qualified applicants by 50%” (not “We’re optimistic about the future.”)

Anticipate potential objections to your proposal, and address them directly. Explain, for example, the problems that might arise, and present your plans for addressing or minimizing them. Avoid including any material that is not part of the main document.

Close the Deal

End with explicit recommendations based on the results of your work. This section will probably make up the bulk of the summary because an audience of executives will be especially focused on action items and their effects on the organization. Specific data are crucial in this section of the summary.

Ex. On the basis of our analysis, we recommend that the ABC Clinic take the following steps:

- Develop partnerships with State University Nursing School and Community College Nursing Program to offer practicum training for their students.
- Expand the reach of our employment advertising to include all major cities within 200 miles.
- Send targeted bulk email to qualified students throughout the tri-state region.

Existing nursing administrative staff are well placed to work closely with university and college administrators to organize a practicum program. A modest outlay of \$2500 to cover consultant labor and promotional materials is expected to generate approximately 50-60 new applications per year.

Be sure your executive summary provides a complete picture of the work outlined in the main document. Consider what an executive would need to know in order to make a decision about policies, actions, or expenditures, and provide that information as clearly and briefly as possible.