

Guidelines for Writing an Executive Summary

An executive summary is a brief overview of a report designed to give readers a quick preview of its contents. Its purpose is to consolidate the principal points of a document in one place. After reading the summary, your audience should understand the main points you are making and your evidence for those points without having to read every part of your report in full. That's why they are called executive summaries — the audience is usually someone who makes funding, personnel, or policy decisions and needs information quickly and efficiently.

KEYPOINT: Remember that your purpose is to provide an overview or preview to an audience who may or may not have time to read the whole report carefully.

- An executive summary should explain why you wrote the report, emphasize your conclusions or recommendation, and include only the essential or most significant information to support those conclusions
- Executive summaries are usually organized according to the sequence of information presented in the full report, so follow the order of your report as you discuss the reasons for your conclusions.
- Executive summaries are usually proportional in length to the larger work they summarize, typically 10-15%. Most executive summaries are 1-2 paragraphs, but less than one page.
- Write the executive summary after you have completed the report and decided on your recommendations. Look at first and last sentences of paragraphs to begin to outline your summary. Go through and find key words and use those words to organize a draft of your summary; look for words that enumerate (first, next, finally); words that express causation (therefore, consequently); words that signal essentials (basically, central, leading, principal, major) and contrast (however, similarly, more than, less likely).
- Make the summary concise, but be sure to show why you've arrived at your conclusions.
- Don't introduce any new information that is not in your report.
- Executive summaries should communicate independently of the report. Ask someone not familiar with the report's examples to read your executive summary to see if it makes sense.
- Remember to spell-check and proofread. Don't trust the Spellchecker alone.

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