

How to Write **Executive Summaries**

Your Words Matter series

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About the Author and the Document

This document has been developed as part of a series of professional development resources for students at the College of Business Administration by a staff member who has almost 20 years of corporate experience. These materials are reviewed by corporate executives and others as we work to provide helpful information now, as students prepare for careers.



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How to Write Executive Summaries

Executive summaries are written so readers understand the main points and conclusions of longer reports.

Writing Executive Summaries

It's true when people say we live in an information age. Never before has so much been written and published. Numerous reports, long articles, white papers, and other documents are produced every day. If a person decided to read all the materials produced for a particular category or industry, there would be little time left in the day for much else. To help with this issue, many longer and more complex documents have executive summaries associated, which provide concise overviews of the longer works.

Business reports and other, longer documents often offer recommendations based on analyses. By reading executive summaries, organizational decision-makers and other busy people can read recommended actions that typically are part of a report and absorb the main points supporting the recommendations. It also is a document that allows readers to decide if they want to read certain sections or the entire report.

As a business student, you should be familiar with the purpose of and how to write executive summaries. While there are no set rules about how to write one because documents and reports vary so much, there are certain essential aspects to which writers should adhere.



Effective Executive Summaries

Executive summaries are meant to summarize main points of a report or other type of document, including the recommendations and crucial data supporting the recommendations. The executive summary must provide enough information for the reader to understand why the report or document was produced and the significant conclusions in it. While brevity and conciseness are keys, it's also essential to provide the evidence/information from the report that supports the conclusions/recommendations, etc., so readers can follow the path to the conclusions. Executive summaries should always be written after a report is completed, and never introduce new information in the executive summary.

Executive reports are written for a primary audience of executives; but you still will need to briefly define terms and concepts.

Audience

Assume your primary audience is executive level employees, even if we know people at other levels will be reading your executive summary. The key for the primary audience is to have all the salient points of the report presented concisely so you provide an accurate representation of the report content and recommendations. You'll still need to briefly define special terms and concepts from the report.

Parts of the Executive Summary

Reports should be well-written enough to have each section build to the conclusion. Remember, you are trying to help someone understand the most important points of the document, so determine what should and shouldn't be included based on that. In theory, every section is important, but not every section has the most crucial information that bears on the report's conclusions/recommendations.

Sections of an executive summary should generally reflect the major sections of the document or report with which it's associated. For example, it's crucial to include a methodology section when the report has a methodology that underlies the report's analysis. Summarize the key finding in a "Findings" section if the report has one. Provide a concise description of the solution to the problem and why, which often is followed by specific recommendations. Your executive summary should mirror the main headings and provide synopses of the main points. However, while primary sections also often have subsections, you will need to use our judgment on what to include.

Main Idea (Thesis)

Any well-written document is about a central idea. Make sure you identify the main idea, often called the thesis, and capture it in one-three sentences.

Make sure you clearly identify the purpose of the longer report in your executive summary.

Purpose

Lengthy documents are written for a reason. It could be a business plan, an analysis of the risks a disruptive technology presents to a business with some recommended actions, or a report about a government program that helps increase literacy, or a class project. If you are responsible for writing the executive summary, identify why a report was written and summarize it in one-three sentences.

Methodology

Include information from sections that directly lead to report conclusions/recommendations.

The reader needs to know what information was collected and how it was analyzed to understand on the basis of the recommendations. Provide the bases of the methodology and how it's been applied to the issue.

Tone

Some believe the executive summary should be written from a first person plural (we, us) perspective, and others believe it should be written more formally (referring to "the company," etc.). The tone will depend on the audience and how the document will be used. If the document is published to a Website, it might be best to write it more formally. If it is a short executive summary for an internal document, you can use "we."

Length

As with other aspects of executive summaries, guidelines on length vary. Your executive summary should be at most 10 percent of the final document. Therefore, a 10-page white paper would have a 1-page executive summary; a 100-page report should have a 10-page executive summary, and so forth.

Take-aways

This document provides some basic guidelines for how to write executive summaries. Please note that organizations and industries often have specific guidelines for writing executive summaries. Just remember that you need to produce concise summaries of the crucial aspects of the document so a person can read only the executive summary and understand the longer report.

Resources

Sample Executive Summaries

- [Executive Summary for the Report of the Working Group on Expanding Access to Published Research Findings](#)
- [9/11 Commission Report Executive Summary](#)
- [Executive Summary for the World of Work Report 2013 Re-pairing the economic and social fabric report](#)

Online Resources for Writing Executive Summaries

- [Texas A&M Writing Center](#)
- [Colorado State University](#)
- [Executive Summaries for Business Plans](#)
- [University of Maryland University College](#)
- [Abstracts and Executive Summaries: Purdue Online Writing Lab](#)

The University of Akron's Communication Resources

Springboard site:

- Navigating Corporate America
- How to Create Effective Explanations
- How to Peer Edit
- How to Avoid Plagiarism
- Write Emails the Right Way – tutorial
- It's All Greek to Me – tutorial
- Ingredients for Great Presentations –tutorial
- PowerPoint® Design Basics – tutorial
- Common Presentation Mistakes to Avoid – tutorial
- Presenting Numbers – tutorial
- Presentation Introductions and Conclusions – tutorial

If you do not have access to the Springboard Communication Resources site, send your student identification number, your full name, and your email address to [Betsy DuWaldt](#), Business Practitioner – Communications. ●