

Executive Summary

Click here to enter text for Executive Summary:

Research shows that only 15% of decision-makers ever read the body of a large report - but 100% of them read the executive summary. So treat it as the most critical part of your report. Write it as though it will be read as a stand-alone document. Expect busy managers to judge you and your organisation on its clarity, as it is the only part of the document that many of them will ever read.

General Guidelines for writing an effective executive summary

1. Keep it short. Aim for 1-2 pages maximum – regardless of the length of the complete document.
2. Do not put technical details in your executive summary.
3. Use plain language. Avoid unusual vocabulary and jargon; make it as easy as possible for managers to grasp your message.
4. Write your executive summary last. If you write the body first, it's easier to capture sentences and bring them up to create your summary.
5. As the name suggests – the summary is for 'executives.' Executives are decision-makers, not necessarily subject-matter experts. They don't like having to forage in the body of a report to find answers to these basic questions:
 - What is this about? (What)
 - Is this helpful, useful, or relevant to me or my organisation? (Relevance – why, how)
 - What is this writer saying we should do? (Recommendation)
 - How did the writer get to this understanding? (Your 'approach' to the topic at hand)

Always answer these questions in your summary – and in preferably in sequence.

Structure your content for an effective executive summary

- Get to the point. Start every executive summary you ever write with a clear statement of what your report is about. (The what) If it's about a problem, tell them what the problem is – right up front.
- Next, clearly explain to your readers how the issue or topic is relevant to them. (Relevance – why, how). You've already identified the key facts, so now your readers need to know what it means to them or their company.
- Now bring in your high-level recommendations. All business proposals and reports are about selling solutions. If managers never read anything else, they can at least make their decisions based on your clear recommendations.
- The next part of your executive summary should mirror the body of your document. Include short, pithy statements to give readers an overview of the body of your report. You can always direct them to sections – such as scope, methodology and others for more detail.
- Clear conclusions. To complete an effective summary, wrap up with clear, unambiguous, statements. These are the last things most managers see. Your conclusions will vary according to the topics you are writing about, but whatever you do, make them clear. Then your readers walk away from your executive summary thinking – 'This makes sense. It's easy to read. I'll go with this recommendation.'