

Tips on writing an effective executive summary

Did you know that, typically, **only 15 per cent** of decision-makers ever read the body of a large report? Yet . . . research shows that 100 per cent of decision-makers read the executive summary!

So treat your executive summary 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. After all, that's the only part of the document that many of them will ever read.

But what makes a truly effective executive summary? Here are my top 10 tips. Tips 1-5 are **general guidelines**. Tips 6-10 cover the **structure** of an executive summary. Of course there are other tips, but if you follow these you'll be on the money.

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. The old rule (that a summary should equal 10 per cent of the body of a report) died with the dinosaurs. If you need more than 2 pages to get the main ideas across, you've got too many ideas
2. Unless it's a life and death matter, do not put technical details in your executive summary. Remember it's called a 'summary' for a reason
3. Use plain language. Avoid unusual vocabulary and jargon in your summary. Your aim is to make it as easy as possible for managers to grasp your message. The plainer your language, the quicker and easier it will be for readers to get the main points and make decisions
4. Write your executive summary last. If you write it before you complete the body of the report, you risk closing down your thinking too soon and putting the wrong stuff in. Whereas, 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. They are not necessarily subject-matter experts. Usually they approach a summary with high-level questions and a particular a mind-set. They don't like having to forage in the body of a report to find answers to basic questions. Visualise an executive reading your summary. Likely she will be reading with questions like these:
 - 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 the sequence shown.

Structure your content for an effective executive summary

6. 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. If it's about cracks in a bridge, tell them how bad they are – up front. If it's about re-designing a building, tell them – up front. People always want the facts up front – so hand them over, politely of course
7. 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 these mean. For example, you may have inspected a damaged bridge and found large cracks (the facts). At this point most managers want to know what it means; the risks for them or their company. So tell them (Relevance – why, how)
8. Now bring in your high-level recommendations. If you really think about it, all business proposals are about selling solutions. This also applies to most business reports. So let's be honest and treat recommendations for what they really are – sales pitches. If your recommendation is to construct a new bridge – then say it. If your recommendation is to patch up the old one – say it. If managers never read anything else – at least they can make decisions when you put clear recommendations early as possible in your executive summary
9. The next part of your executive summary should mirror the body of your document. The aim here is to include short, pithy, statements to give readers an overview of the body of your report. There are no hard and fast rules here. But typically you only need to supply enough information so readers understand what's in the body of your report. Remember, you can always direct them to sections – such as scope, methodology and others for more detail
10. Clear conclusions. To complete an effective summary, wrap up with clear, unambiguous, statements. These are the last things most managers see. Your conclusion might be a short series of recommended actions. It might simply be reinforcing the need for a variation in a contract. Or, your conclusion might be a request for approval and sign-off

Your conclusions will vary according to the topics you are writing about. The point here is that, whatever you do, make your conclusions clear. Then your readers walk away from your executive summary thinking – 'this writer knows her stuff. It makes sense. It's easy to read. I'll go with what she recommends.'