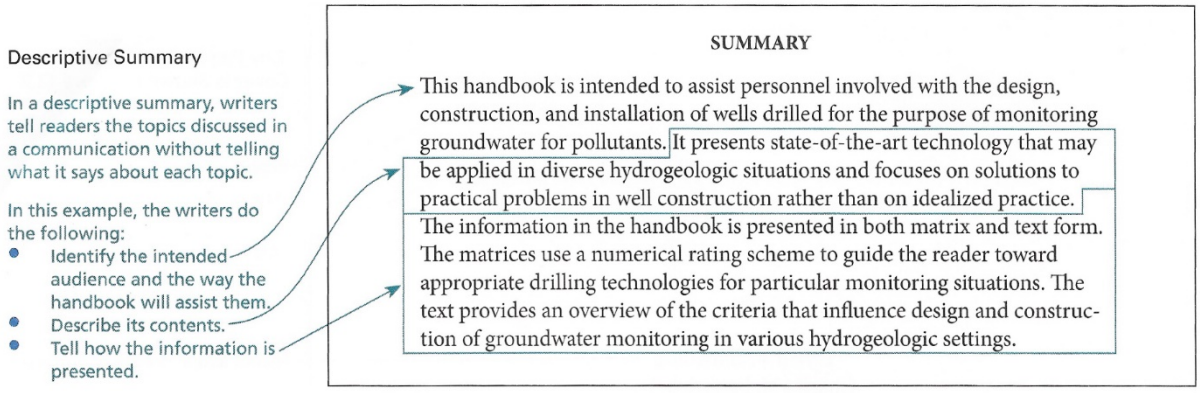
COMM-256 |
Professional Communications and Presentation Skills
Preparing Summaries

Most reports and proposals that have front matter include a summary, sometimes called an *abstract*. These summaries serve three purposes:

1. They help busy managers learn the main points without reading the entire document.
2. They help all readers build a mental framework for organising and understanding the detailed information they will encounter as they read on.
3. They help readers determine whether they should read the full communication.

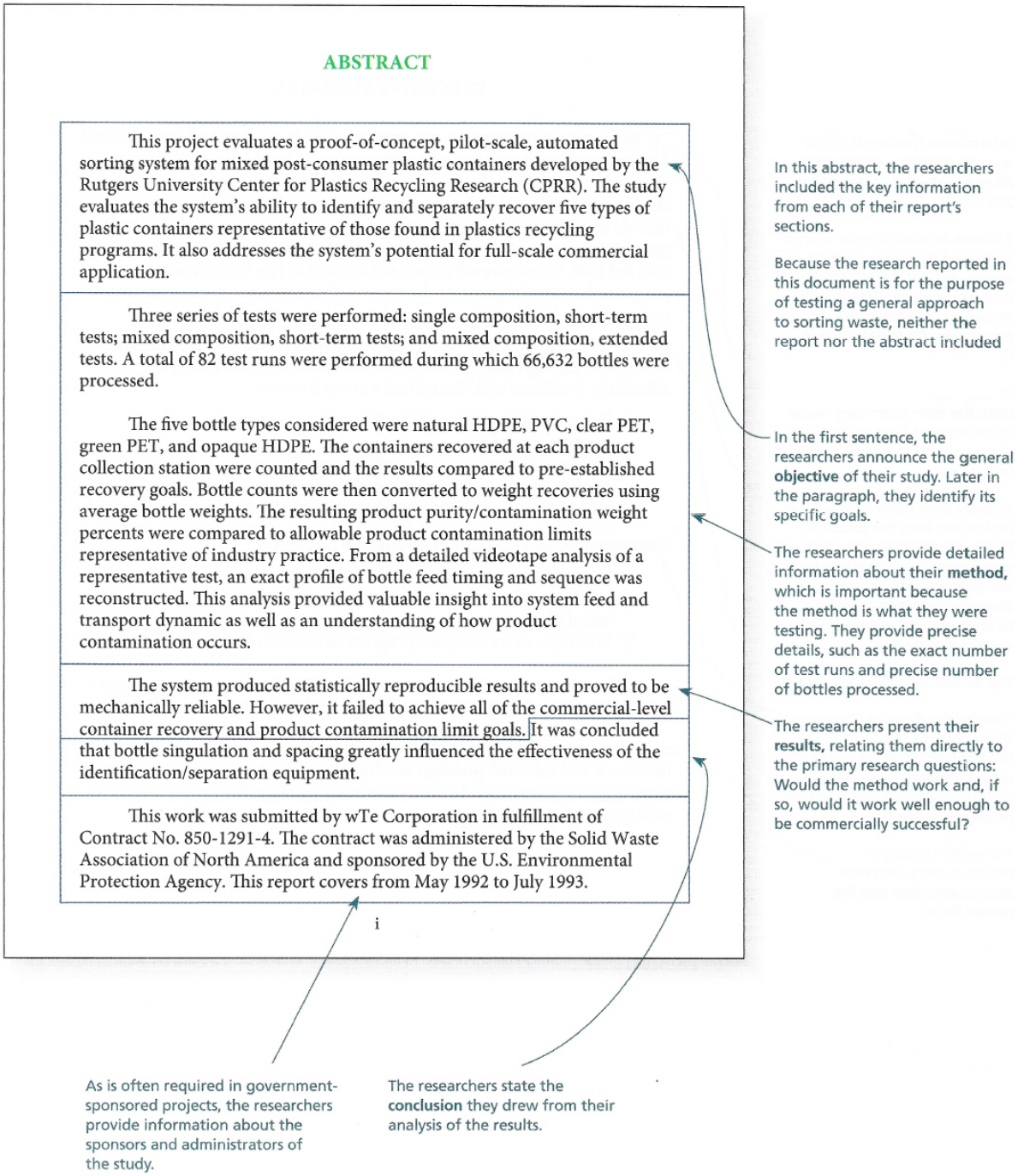
There are three types of summary. For each communication that you write, choose the one that will give your readers the most help as they perform their tasks.

➔ Descriptive summaries resemble a prose table of contents. They help readers decide whether to read the communication by identifying major topics covered. They do not tell the main points made about each topic. Often, descriptive summaries are used for research reports that will be placed in widely available resources, such as government databases or libraries. To aid in computerised bibliographic searches, they often contain keywords that would be used by persons seeking the kind of information the document contains. The figure below is an example of a descriptive summary.



➔ Informative summaries distill the main points from the full document, usually in a page or less, together with enough background information about purpose and method to help readers understand the context in which the key information was developed. Informative summaries are ideally suited to readers who want to make decisions or take other action

based on the findings, conclusions and recommendations reported in the document. The figure below is an example of an informative summary.



ABSTRACT

This project evaluates a proof-of-concept, pilot-scale, automated sorting system for mixed post-consumer plastic containers developed by the Rutgers University Center for Plastics Recycling Research (CPRR). The study evaluates the system's ability to identify and separately recover five types of plastic containers representative of those found in plastics recycling programs. It also addresses the system's potential for full-scale commercial application.

Three series of tests were performed: single composition, short-term tests; mixed composition, short-term tests; and mixed composition, extended tests. A total of 82 test runs were performed during which 66,632 bottles were processed.

The five bottle types considered were natural HDPE, PVC, clear PET, green PET, and opaque HDPE. The containers recovered at each product collection station were counted and the results compared to pre-established recovery goals. Bottle counts were then converted to weight recoveries using average bottle weights. The resulting product purity/contamination weight percents were compared to allowable product contamination limits representative of industry practice. From a detailed videotape analysis of a representative test, an exact profile of bottle feed timing and sequence was reconstructed. This analysis provided valuable insight into system feed and transport dynamic as well as an understanding of how product contamination occurs.

The system produced statistically reproducible results and proved to be mechanically reliable. However, it failed to achieve all of the commercial-level container recovery and product contamination limit goals. It was concluded that bottle singulation and spacing greatly influenced the effectiveness of the identification/separation equipment.

This work was submitted by wTe Corporation in fulfillment of Contract No. 850-1291-4. The contract was administered by the Solid Waste Association of North America and sponsored by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. This report covers from May 1992 to July 1993.

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In this abstract, the researchers included the key information from each of their report's sections.

Because the research reported in this document is for the purpose of testing a general approach to sorting waste, neither the report nor the abstract included

In the first sentence, the researchers announce the general **objective** of their study. Later in the paragraph, they identify its specific goals.

The researchers provide detailed information about their **method**, which is important because the method is what they were testing. They provide precise details, such as the exact number of test runs and precise number of bottles processed.

The researchers present their **results**, relating them directly to the primary research questions: Would the method work and, if so, would it work well enough to be commercially successful?

As is often required in government-sponsored projects, the researchers provide information about the sponsors and administrators of the study.

The researchers state the **conclusion** they drew from their analysis of the results.

➔ Executive summaries are a form of informative summary tailored to the needs of executives and other decision makers who, pressed for time, want to extract the main points of a communication without reading all of it. Typically, executive summaries open by focusing on organisational questions and issues and briefly describe the investigative or research methods used by the writer. Often half or even more of the summary is devoted to precisely summarising major conclusions and recommend actions – the type of information most helpful to decision makers. The figure below is an example of an executive summary.

Executive Summary

In this executive summary, the writers include the key information from each of the report's sections, condensing a 28-page report into fewer than 250 words.

Because an executive summary is addressed to decision makers, the writers present the information on which their readers would decide what action to take.

In their first sentence, the writers state the **main point** they make in the body of their report: The airport should purchase a new system.

Because their readers would not be familiar with the details of the Accounting Department's computers, the writers provide the **background information** these readers need in order to understand the rest of the executive summary.

The writers pinpoint the **problem.**

They briefly describe the three **possible solutions** they investigated. Their language echoes the statements they made in the preceding list of the problem's sources.

The writers conclude their summary with their **recommendation and the reason for it.**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Accounting Department recommends that Columbus International Airport purchase a new operating system for its InfoMaxx Minicomputer. The airport purchased the InfoMaxx Minicomputer in 2005 to replace an obsolete and failing Hutchins computer system. However, the new InfoMaxx computer has never successfully performed one of its key tasks: generating weekly accounting reports based on the expense and revenue data fed to it. When airport personnel attempt to run the computer program that should generate the reports, the computer issues a message stating that it does not have enough internal memory for the job.

Our department's analysis of this problem revealed that the InfoMaxx would have enough internal memory if the software used that space efficiently. Problems with the software are as follows:

1. The operating system, BT/Q-91, uses the computer's internal memory wastefully.
2. The SuperReport program, which is used to generate the accounting reports, is much too cumbersome to create reports this complex with the memory space available on the InfoMaxx computer.

Consequently, we evaluated three possible solutions:

1. Buying a new operating system (BT/Q-101) at a cost of $3500. It would double the amount of usable space and also speed calculations.
2. Writing a more compact program in LINUX, at a cost of $5000 in labor.
3. Revising SuperReport to prepare the overall report in small chunks, at a cost of $4000. SuperReport now successfully runs small reports.

We recommend the first alternative, buying a new operating system, because it will solve the problem for the least cost. The minor advantages of writing a new program in LINUX or of revising SuperReport are not sufficient to justify their cost.

Summaries that appear in printed and online bibliographic resources are usually called *abstracts*. In many scientific and engineering fields, the term *abstract* is also used for the summary that appears at the front of long reports and proposals.

Whether you are writing a descriptive, informative or executive summary, follow these reader-centred guidelines:

1. Make it 100 percent redundant with the communication. This purposeful redundancy provides a complete and understandable message to the reader who reads nothing else in the communication. It also means that the summary can't serve as the introduction, even though the introduction that follows it may seem somewhat repetitious.
2. Mirror the structure of the overall communication. Include information from each major part of the communication, presented in the order of the parts in the overall communication.
3. Meet the needs of your readers. For example, if you know that your readers will be primarily interested in a novel method you used, provide more detail about the method than you would for readers who are primarily interested in your results. Likewise, in deciding what to include from any part of the full document, pick the information your specific readers will find most useful.
4. Be specific. Replace general terms with precise ones. Instead of saying that it was "hot", say that it was "150° C." Rather than saying the less expensive alternative "saved money", say that it saved "$43,000 per month." The more specific your abstract, the more useful it will be to your readers.
5. Keep it short. Summaries are typically only 2 to 5 percent of the length of the body of the communication (not counting attachments and appendices). That's between half a page and a whole page for every 20 pages in the body of your communication.
6. Write concisely. Abstracts need to be lean but highly informative. Keep them short by eliminating unnecessary words, not by leaving out information important to your readers.