



GUIDELINES FOR WRITING AN EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- A. Good to know about executive summaries
- B. Elements of an executive summary
- C. Guidelines for preparing an executive summary in 9 steps
- D. Examples of high-quality executive summaries (to be used in your own work)
- E. References used in this Guideline

A. Good to know about executive summaries

What is an executive summary?

A short and clear, compelling summary of an expert opinion report or of any other study (often studies with practical or political implications).

An indication of the main points considered and the conclusions reached.

A written, scientific statement in support of a specific position, answer, solution or recommendation in a concise, clear and coherent form.

What is the function of executive summaries?

- To communicate the main points and conclusions of a study, meeting, discussion, grant proposal or conference in a short text.
- To inform busy people in executive positions (e.g. managers, politicians, funding officers) on the status of a scientific issue.
- To indicate points for consideration and the present science-based recommendations

Who is the audience of executive summaries?

Executive summaries are prepared for a well-educated audience with various educational backgrounds. Typical readers have a tight schedule and want to extract key messages from the text as fast as possible. Therefore subject-specific language and complex explanations should be avoided.

How long is an executive summary?

Executive summaries should be as short as possible, without being as short as an abstract in a research article. One or two pages (of text) is fine, three okay and four pages the maximum. In rare cases, for very extensive studies, executive summaries might be longer.

B. Elements of an executive summary

Short executive summaries usually do not have different sections but only a few paragraphs. However, as sections and subtitles help to structure the text and help to communicate the message, longer executive summaries should be subdivided into sections.

Structural principles for executive summaries

Argument	Context and Question Main arguments Answer and implications
Abstract	introduction Materials and methods Results Conclusion
Problem solution	situation (circumstances, conditions) Problem (shortcomings, open question) Solution (one or several solutions or answers) evaluation (critical appraisal of solutions; is the question and answered or the problem solved?)
Additional recommendations	If recommendations for actions are given in an executive summary, these are presented at the end. Sometimes bold type is used for these recommendations (Seely 2002)
In some cases, dependent on topic or the approach of the author and /or client, definite recommendations are not given but different options with their advantages and disadvantages provided	

An executive summary must be clear, concise and coherent

Clear	Say exactly what you intend, in a way that is as clear as possible to the reader Use definite, specific, concrete language. Use the active voice. Put statements in positive form. Express coordinate ideas in similar form (parallel construction of sentences). Keep connected words in a sentence closely together (e.g. subject and verb).
Concise	Omit needless words, phrases, or whole sentences. Needless words are those that can be removed without significant loss understanding.
Coherent	Make sure that information elements hold together so that the progress from one point to the next is logical and seems inevitable. 1from strunk & White (2000) and Seely (2002)

Additional points to consider when writing an executive summary

Paragraphs	Cover one idea, aspect or topic per paragraph. The first sentence in a paragraph introduces the topic of that paragraph (topic Sentence) The last sentence summaries points discussed and prepares the reader for the next paragraph
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Tense The present tense is easiest to understand. If possible, use the present tense throughout the executive summary (possible exception: description of applied methods)

C: Preparing an executive summary in 9 steps

Stage	Step
Prepare	i. complete the expert opinion report or study on which executive summary is based ii. defined the key points and the main message
outline	iii. develop the structural outline
draft	iv. write the first draft in one sitting
revise	v. revise the draft (Is it clear, concise, coherent?) vi. ask somebody for feedback vii. revise the text again (several cycles of feedback and revision increase text quality) viii. correct grammar, spelling, punctuation ix. adjust the layout

Make sure to have enough time for the feedback and revision process. As executive summaries are read by many people and as they may influence important decisions, it is very important that executive summaries are well worded.

D: Examples of high quality executive summaries (biological and environmental sciences)

The following three executive summaries differ substantially in format, length and use of images and figures. We suggest you spend a moment looking at each one and then choose one of them to see how they have used the text to convey their science and recommendations.

E. References

Seely, J. (200): Writing reports. One step ahead series. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 120 pp.
Strunk, W., White, E. B. (2000): The elements of style. Fourth edition. Longman Publishers, New York, 105 pp.