

Short Guide to Executive Summaries for the STO

1. WHAT IS AN EXECUTIVE SUMMARY?

In general, an Executive Summary is a brief overview of a report, designed to give readers a quick preview of its contents. Its purpose is to consolidate the principal points of a document and to provide an overview or preview to an audience who may or may not have time to read the whole report carefully. After reading the summary, your audience should understand the main points you are making and your evidence for those points without having to read every part of your report in full.

Executive Summaries can go by many different names, the most notable confusion being that sometimes the Executive Summary is called an Abstract¹. You usually find that designation in scientific papers and academic efforts which exacerbates the problem for the STO. One can also call the Executive Summary simply a Summary, however if you call the Executive Summary a *précis*, you are probably misnaming it; a *précis* is usually a sentence summary.

The Executive Summary that we are looking for is written for a person who is not an expert or even very knowledgeable in a field. The language should be more general rather than scientific. Often a manager who must make a decision will read the Executive Summary to understand what the writer, who is an expert, found out or recommends. Since the reader may need to understand the gist of a report without having to read every word, the Executive Summary is longer than one paragraph, **although not more than one page**.

It is policy for the CSO to publish an **English** and a **French** version of an Executive Summary at the beginning of each scientific report, the translation being performed at the CSO. The CSO will only accept Executive Summaries written in one of the two official NATO languages. Native speakers of French will submit their texts in French.

2. HOW LONG SHOULD AN STO EXECUTIVE SUMMARY BE?

For technical writing, it is generally accepted that the main goal is to reduce the information to **around four paragraphs, or one page (single spaced copy)**; the art being to include all the important information in a very compact form². *It is CSO policy that all Executive Summaries conform to the “one-page” principle.*

3. WHAT ARE THE KEY PARTS OF AN STO EXECUTIVE SUMMARY?

Typically, an Executive Summary will include the **Issue (Problem)** and **Purpose** of the study in the first paragraph. The **Scope** and **Limitations** as well as the **Alternatives** (Procedures) will go in the next paragraphs. The Significant **Considerations**, **Analysis/Results**, **Decisions** and **Recommendations** for further study will comprise the final paragraphs.

As already stated, the Executive Summary will run about one page of copy, and hence only carry significant considerations, analysis, and decisions and clearly should **not** introduce any new information that is not in the main report.

¹ An abstract is separate from the report structure. Abstracts are usually written for the reader who is a peer and shares the writer's scientific background and are usually descriptive rather than informative (i.e. they emphasize what you did more than what you found out). They are **usually restricted to a single paragraph**.

² Some advice states that the Executive Summary can be 10-15% of the original document; however, CSO policy is that it should conform to a single page format.

Further, since the STO is a NATO organization, it is usual to include some information pertaining to the **Military/NATO** significance of the study.

Note also that since the Executive Summary will form part of the final report, it is **not** necessary to include details concerning the dates, location and attendees of the Task Group/Symposium/Specialist Meeting. Even though the Executive Summary is not a stand-alone document, however, it should be able to be read and understood independently of the report – a good tip is to ask someone not familiar with the report's contents to read your Executive Summary to see if it makes sense!

4. STO EXECUTIVE SUMMARY SECURITY CLASSIFICATION

It is CSO policy to, wherever possible, make the Executive Summary available for public release hence the classification should be marked “Unlimited”.