

Master of Science in Higher Education Administration and Policy

Executive Summary Guide

Importance of the Executive Summary

The purpose of this guide is provide the basic strategies and structure for an effective executive summary for your masters project. An executive summary provides a concise, yet thorough overview of your study that synthesizes significant points for targeted audiences; enabling them to understand the overall content, while focusing on key findings with supporting evidence, recommendations, and next steps for solutions. The executive summary is important because it saves decision makers time by providing a stand-alone document of sufficient detail and clarity to communicate your study's key findings, without asking them to read 80+ pages to understand your project. This increases the likelihood of your research making an impact by providing the key study information in a format that is easy for decision makers to understand and take action. The executive summary can also serve as a roadmap for readers that will go on to read your entire master's project.

Key Characteristics of an Executive Summary

Executive summaries typically contain the following characteristics:

- *They are focused, concise, and short.* For your master's project, the executive summary should be no more than two pages in length and be very focused on the most important information.
- *They are stand-alone documents.* Executive summaries are meant to be self-contained documents that can be understood independent of your master's project. It should not contain references to information presented elsewhere in your overall master's project such as "see chart on page X for more information" or "as explained in the overall Data Interpretation section." It should be free of acronyms or abbreviations that are not spelled out in the executive summary.
- *They target a specific audience.* Executive summaries are usually targeted to high level decision makers that can use your key findings to increase their knowledge and implement recommendations.
- *They contain only the most important, synthesized information on your project and focus on key results, conclusions, and recommendations.* Executive summaries provide your audience with information about the significance of your project, what problem you were trying to address, key results and findings, strengths and limitations of your project, and recommendations for next steps. All statements in the executive summary must be substantiated with evidence in your overall master's project paper, but will

contain minimal detail. For more detailed information, readers can consult your overall master's project.

- *They are written after the overall report is complete.* To ensure clarity and that all key points from the overall paper are synthesized, the executive summary cannot be written until after your master's project is complete.
- *They are typically written in paragraph format with minimal visuals.* The majority of the executive summary should be written in full sentence format for maximum understanding by the reader. To help structure the executive summary, section subheadings may be used. Additionally, targeted bullets may be used in certain sections, such as key findings or recommendations. Select visuals may be used to help illustrate your findings.

Executive summaries typically do NOT contain the following characteristics:

- *Executive summaries are not the same as an abstract.* Although abstracts and executive summaries both provide an overview of your master's project, they have different purposes, audiences, content, and length.
- *Executive summaries are not presented in a biased way.* Although your recommendations will be included in the executive summary, it is important to ensure that they are substantiated by your data and are presented in an objective, non-judgmental way. Resist the temptation to insert a plea for support or biased statements. If your executive summary comes across as too biased, it won't be taken seriously and you decrease your chance of making an impact. Your executive summary should include limitations of your study and allow the reader to make an assessment of strengths and weakness and determine possible next steps based on the evidence you provided.
- *Executive summaries are not to be used as an introduction or preface to the overall report.* They should be self-contained stand-alone documents that deliver the key points of the overall master's project.
- *Executive summaries are not a cluttered series of highlights from the overall report.* They should be highly organized, focused, and concise and follow the structure outlined in order to synthesize key points of the study.
- *Executive summaries are not used to present new information not contained in the overall report.* It should contain the most relevant, focused information from the overall master's project and should not contain new insights omitted from your paper.

Abstract and Executive Summary: Key Differences

Abstracts and executive summaries are similar in that they provide a summary of a larger document, create an opportunity for previewing more detailed content, and present key information for understanding the basic content of your study. They have different audiences, purposes, content, length, and use of bullets and visuals as seen in the table below.

	Abstract	Executive Summary
Audience	Colleagues with similar technical knowledge of the field; general readers.	Typically decision makers.
Purpose	Provides information, describes the purpose of the research and gives an overview of the document.	Provides key findings and recommendations to provide next steps for decision makers consider; can be a call to action.
Reference to Full Document	Not intended to replace reading the full document. It should contain key information to let the reader decide whether they should read the rest of the paper.	Can be used as a stand-alone document that may replace reading the full document.
Content	Can be more academic/technical in nature: present issue, discuss methodology, data results, analysis, interpretations, and conclusions.	Can be more managerial in nature: focuses on key findings, conclusions, and recommendations as a basis for decision making.
Length	Short – no more than 120 words.	Longer than abstract, but should not exceed 2 pages.
Use of Bullets/ Visuals	Should not contain bullets or any visuals.	May contain targeted bullets and visuals to communicate essential information.

Writing the Executive Summary

There are four basic steps listed below that will help you turn your complex research study into a succinct and powerful executive summary that will capture the attention of your targeted reader.

1) Re-read your Entire Master's Project Paper.

It is very important that you read your entire research study thoroughly from beginning to end in order to write an effective executive summary. As you read, highlight or take notes on important statements in key sections, while keeping the executive summary structure in mind. This will help you organize and summarize your master's project.

2) Define the Key Points of the Main Sections and Keep the Targeted Audience in Mind.

Map out the executive summary structure and basic content according to the following executive summary sections listed below:

Introduction: Provide a brief summary of the project and why it was conducted. You can include background information on your topic, the purpose of the study, summary of the research question, address what problem or issue you are trying to solve, and why it is important for the field of study. You may provide a very brief history on the research if the impetus was a specific event, issue, policy, or law.

Methods: Provide a concise overview of your data collection process and analysis. If applicable, include the number of interview participants, specific sample populations, sampling methods, survey response rates, administration methods, time period of the data or data collection, names of partners or organizations involved (if allowed under confidentiality agreement), and relevant definitions.

Key Findings: Includes key findings from your data results, data interpretation or discussion sections. Is there a simple way to summarize or quantify the most significant findings? Ensure that it is written at a level that is appropriate for the intended target audience and is not filled with technical jargon. Keep numbers simple and rounded when possible (\$2.4 million instead of \$2,428,985).

Limitations: Discuss possible limitations of the study and data sources. You may discuss limits of generalizability due to scope or breadth of research.

Conclusion: Answer the research question, discuss possible significance and implications of the research findings. Do the findings suggest a new best practice or model? Do the findings identify emerging new issues or trends?

Recommendations: Provide specific recommendations resulting from your study that address your research question or provide potential action or directions for solution on your topic of study. What future steps are needed in the short term or long term? How can your findings be translated into actual program or policy changes? Is additional study

need or do you have suggestions for future research? Are there unresolved issues that should be addressed?

In order to provide a thorough, but concise overview of your study, try to select two to five main points from relevant sections of your master's project paper.

While thinking about your key audience, select which parts of your master's project are the most important. What details are needed for a high level administrator to make a decision on implementing your recommendations? What content would be the most relevant? Remove points that are interesting, but are not key for answering your research question or pertinent to your intended audience.

3) Draft a Synthesized, Concise Executive Summary Using the Appropriate Writing Style and Structure.

When drafting the executive summary, write in single spaced, paragraph format. Each paragraph should address a single topic section and the first sentence of each paragraph should clearly lay out the topic being addressed. Try to use strong, positive, clear language. Use active over passive voice. Passive, imprecise language weakens your executive summary. Keep the tone matter of fact and avoid using biased or judgmental statements or pleas for help. Avoid overstating or embellishing results.

As previously mentioned, section subheadings may be used to provide additional structure. Bullets can be used in the Key Findings or Recommendations sections to help emphasize main points in a simplified way. Visuals may be used to help illustrate your findings if they are deemed integral to the summary content, are self-explanatory, and communicate essential information more effectively than words. In a two page summary, they should be used sparingly.

4) Re-read the Executive Summary.

Review, revise, and proofread the draft to make sure that the final version is grammatically correct and free of spelling errors. It should be logically organized and contain clear, concise language that is appropriate to the target audience. Make sure that it will make sense as a separate document from your full master's project. Give it to a reader unfamiliar with your topic to review and provide feedback.