

Executive Summaries

An executive summary is a brief overview of a report designed to give readers a quick preview of its contents. Its purpose is to provide the central claims of a document in one place. 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. As you might expect, the audience for executive summaries is usually someone who makes larger funding, personnel, or policy decisions and needs information quickly and efficiently. Remember that your purpose is to provide an overview or preview to an audience who may not have time to read the whole report carefully.

Some guidelines for writing executive summaries:

- An executive summary should explain why you wrote the report (not by claiming “I had to for class” but by describing your guiding question or the problem/puzzle you had to solve), emphasize your conclusions or recommendation, and include only the essential or most significant information to support those conclusions
- Executive summaries are usually organized according to the sequence of information presented in the full report, so follow the order of your proposal as you discuss the reasons for your conclusions.
- Executive summaries are usually proportional in length to the larger work they summarize, typically 10-15%. For this project, they should be no more than a page.
- Write the executive summary after you have completed the proposal and decided on your conclusions or recommendations. Look at the first and last sentences of paragraphs to begin to outline your summary.¹ Go through and find key words and use those words to organize a draft of your summary; look for words that enumerate (first, next, finally); words that express causation (therefore, consequently); words that signal essentials (basically, central, leading, principal, major) and contrast (however, similarly, more than, less likely).
- Make the summary concise, but be sure to show why you've arrived at your conclusions.
- Don't introduce any new information that is not in the full document.
- Executive summaries should communicate independently of the report. Ask someone not familiar with the report's examples to read your executive summary to see if it makes sense.
- Remember to spellcheck and proofread. Because this may be the only element of your document that a decision-making audience reads, you especially want to seem credible and knowledgeable.
- Read aloud and revise, revise, revise your prose so that the executive summary flows smoothly from beginning to end.

¹ This is also an excellent way to see whether the structure of paragraphs in your proposal is working effectively. First sentences of paragraphs typically introduce the main idea of the paragraph, and last sentences transition into the next idea.