Executive Summaries

by Pamela Hubbell

The Executive Summary is a one to two page summary of the findings, conclusions, and recommendations of the report or document it precedes. Information in the summary should be presented in the same order that it appears in the report. In some cases, the Executive Summary will be all that the audience will read; therefore, it needs to present the essential points efficiently.

When preparing the Executive Summary after the report is written, you should do the following:

- Review the report
- Summarize the purpose of the report, the problem addressed, and your findings, conclusions, and recommendations
- Support your recommendations by listing the major headings and briefly summarizing these sections. Eliminate all nonessential detail and use minimal technical language.
- Do not include information in the Executive Summary that is not in the report.
- Refer to the Business Plan tips for information on Executive Summaries specifically for Business Plans.

References

University of Kansas Writing Center web site

Guidelines for Writing an Executive Summary

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 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. That's why they are called executive summaries -- the audience is usually someone who makes 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 or 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, 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 report as you discuss the reasons for your conclusions.
- Executive summaries are usually proportional in length to the larger work they summarize, typically 10-15%. Most executive summaries are 1-2 paragraphs.
- Write the executive summary after you have completed the report and decided on your recommendations. Look at first and last sentences of paragraphs to begin to outline your summary. 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 your report.
- 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 spell-check and proofread. Don't trust the Spellchecker alone.

For more information on writing executive summaries, click here.
GUIDELINES FOR WRITING AN EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Often, report readers are extremely busy managers who may not have the time or interest to read your entire report. Therefore, as a report writer, one of the most important documents that you create will be the executive summary - a time saving review of the salient points of the report. You will need to write this document carefully because it may be the only part of the report that is actually read by upper management.

The Executive Summary should reflect a number of principles:

- It must be short - no more than one page single-spaced. It has been suggested that a general rule is that the executive summary should be about 10% of the overall length of the report although common sense, and not a rule, should dictate its length. Obviously, no more than one page would be most appropriate; excessive length could defeat its major purpose.
- It should be self-contained. It should be able to stand alone from the rest of the report. For this reason, all pertinent “demographic” information should appear on the executive summary as well as the report itself. Frequently, an executive summary is separated from a report, duplicated, and distributed to interested readers throughout an organization.
- It should accurately reflect the content of the report. It must convey the same information to a reader, as he or she would get by reading the entire report. Thus, it is the report in miniature.
- It should be easy to read. Reader comprehension can be made easier by the appropriate use of white space, short paragraphs, numbered lists, or bulleted points.
- It should be organized so that important information is communicated early in the document. A direct order is preferred because important content is presented first. The following order of information is suggested:
  - Conclusion(s)/recommendation(s)
  - Study Objective and Method
  - Finding/Support
  - Finding/Support
  - Etc.