



How to Write an Executive Summary

An executive summary is a concise document, demonstrating the problem, findings and recommendation of a longer policy report.

Writing an executive summary will help your audience quickly understand the policy problem and proposed solution of your report. It is intended for a busy reader; and is a stand-alone, 1-2 page actionable document of no more than 1000 words.

Good executive summaries start by introducing your project: What policy problem drives the work? Who is the client and what is their motivation? What research questions did you consider? A strong opening paragraph or two on the scope and policy problem will help your audience understand the context, and will create urgency around the work.

Once your audience understands the policy problem, you can demonstrate your key findings from your research. It is important to keep this description at a high level, as you will expand upon your findings inside the body of the document. You can briefly mention methods; but this will not replace a methodology section in the body of your report. Ultimately, the middle of your executive summary answers: What did you learn?

Next, you can advocate for your recommendations. It is helpful to connect your recommendations back to your findings, for clarity. In other words, your recommendations should either improve or address your findings. This description will also be at a high level, as recommendations will be built out further inside your report. Your reader will need to understand what you propose by the end of the executive summary, and what supporting reasons or criteria you used to select this recommendation. Also consider: Is this a new course of action? What would be key first steps? What other stakeholders can or should be involved? What are the limitations and consequences of the action you propose?

The last element of your executive summary is a short conclusion. The conclusion is a nice place to connect back to the client and audience: Why would your client benefit from doing the work you recommend? How will your recommendation(s) improve the policy problem you see? Who else should be involved? Basically, the conclusion is an opportunity to create a call to action, and connect with the goals of your reader.

After you've written your draft executive summary, you can revise to ensure that the writing is concise and clear. Some basic revision tips to consider are:

- As often as possible, rewrite sentences in an active voice.
- Revise sentences to be short and concise for clarity.
- Make sure that each paragraph of your executive summary contains one main point.
- Spell out acronyms to connect with various stakeholders and readers.

You can also use formatting – such as text boxes – to highlight key concepts and to define terms that your reader will need to know to understand either your policy problem and/or recommendation. You can use bold or bullets to ensure that the main components of your executive summary – the policy problem, findings and recommendations – are clearly visible to your reader.

Taking these steps will help the busy reader understand the scope of your report and the action steps you recommend.

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