



## The Executive Summary: Common Problems and Mistakes

There are a number of documents that require some kind of summary placed at their beginning. These documents include business proposals, research project proposals, theses, and dissertations. However, some require an abstract, while others require an executive summary. It is the responsibility of the writer to know which of those summaries is appropriate. It is the purpose of this article to discuss the most common errors made in constructing the executive summary.

### Purpose of the Executive Summary

What is an executive summary and when is it used? How is an executive summary different from an abstract? These are serious questions because the purposes of the abstract and executive summary are so different. The key differences between an abstract and an executive summary can be found in their definitions.

Abstracts are summaries designed to provide a condensed version of a longer report, and are written for the purpose of enticing the reader to read the complete document. Abstracts need only be long enough to present the salient aspects of the document and let the reader know if the contents fit their needs. If so, the reader can continue to the document itself. If not, the reader can continue their search for material appropriate to their interests.

Executive Summaries are **summaries provided for a reader** who, most likely, does not have time to read the entire document. Therefore, the Executive Summary must be a separate, stand-alone document, sufficient in content to ensure that the reader can completely understand the contents of the longer document.

### Length of the Executive Summary

One of the biggest mistakes the writer of an Executive Summary can make is in determining the length of their summary. Many writers will do a short summary (sometimes less than one page), breathe a sigh of relief, and escape as quickly as possible, believing their Executive Summary is complete. Other writers will stick to 'between one and three pages,' which is a commonly touted acceptable length for an Executive Summary. Neither is correct.

The correct length of an Executive Summary is that it meets the criteria in the definition of Executive Summary, in no more pages than 10% of the number of pages in the original document, with an upper limit of 10 pages. This requirement keeps the document short enough to be read by busy professionals, but long enough to allow it to be a complete, stand-alone document.

So - how long should an Executive Summary be? The answer is: Meet the definition of Executive Summary in equal to or less than 10% of the total pages in the complete report, but no more than 10 pages total.

## Cutting and Pasting

If a writer is creating a custom written executive summary, by definition, they have a lot of information to cover in a relatively short document. Simply cutting and pasting whole sections of the original document into the Executive Summary is a waste of valuable space.

The writer should have the professional skills necessary to summarize the information in the longer document well enough to put the shorter form into the Executive Summary. Taking up space with excessive subtitles and lists is also a waste of space, unless they are absolutely necessary for the reader to have a complete understanding of the original document.

## Considering the Audience

There is a distinct possibility that more than one Executive Summary will have to be written for a given document. This is especially true when the document is to be presented to more than one group of readers. For example, consider case of project proposals that are being used both for graduate or post-graduate credit, and are also being presented to businesses or governments, in hopes of their being accepted for implementation.

One Executive Summary would have to be written to meet the criteria of the university's graduate school. A second Executive Summary would have to be written to meet the criteria of the potential granting authority. In some cases, this would only necessitate the rewriting of the Conclusion. In other cases, this might necessitate the rewriting of Implications, Justifications, Recommendations, and Conclusions. **It is up to the writer to consider their audience and make adjustments to the Executive Summary accordingly.**

## Clarity, Clarity, Clarity in Writing Custom Executive Summaries

One of the biggest mistakes the writer of an Executive Summary can make is related to the clarity of their Executive Summary. They know what they are talking about, and often forget that their audience is seeing their work for the first time - and only briefly. If they make ambiguous statements in their Executive Summary, they will lose their audience and, given the nature of the documents behind Executive Summaries, perhaps a significant amount of money and prestige as well.

The best way to avoid this mistake is to write the Executive Summary, then find someone who is willing to listen to the Executive Summary read aloud, while they follow along with a printed copy. In this way, it is possible for the writer to find those areas of the Executive Summary in which flow could be better, in which clarity could be improved, and in which important information may have been left out. The reactions and suggestions of a disinterested listener can be invaluable to the process of writing a successful Executive Summary.

## Call to Action

An abstract is designed to persuade the reader to read the entire document or article. The Executive Summary is a stand-alone document that has only a brief amount of time to convince its reader to make a decision concerning whether to implement the proposals

made in the document. The mistake of writing an Executive Summary as if it is only a summary can be devastating to the future of the proposal.

Particular care must be taken to ensure that a sense of urgency is created in the Implications, Recommendations, and Conclusions presented in the Executive Summary. Otherwise, all of the time, effort, and resources spent in creating the original project and document will be lost.

### **Conclusion**

Executive Summaries are not difficult to write. However, ignorance of their purpose, their audience, and their potential can, and will, doom all of the hard work that went into the original project. Avoiding just a few simple mistakes can spell the difference between success and failure.

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