

Guidelines for writing an executive summary

- A) Good to know about executive summaries
- B) Elements of an executive summary
- C) Guidelines for preparing an executive summary in 9 steps
- D) Examples of high-quality executive summaries (to be used in your own work)
- E) References used in this Guideline

A) Good to know about executive summaries

What is an executive summary?

- A short and clear, compelling summary of an expert opinion report (see **Guidelines for writing an Expert Opinion Report**) or of any other study (often studies with practical or political implications).
- An indication of the main points considered and the conclusions reached.
- A written, scientific statement in support of a specific position, answer, solution or recommendation in a concise, clear and coherent form.

What is the function of executive summaries?

- To communicate the main points and conclusions of a study, meeting, discussion, grant proposal or conference in a short text.
- To inform busy people in executive positions (e.g. managers, politicians, funding officers) on the status of a scientific issue.
- To indicate points for consideration and to present science-based recommendations.

Who is the audience of executive summaries?

Executive summaries are prepared for a well-educated audience with various educational backgrounds. Typical readers have a tight schedule and want to extract key messages from the text as fast as possible. Therefore subject-specific language and complex explanations should be avoided.

What is the relationship between an executive summary and an expert opinion report?

- Longer expert opinion report texts, with more than 10 pages, should have an executive summary. This facilitates to access the content of the expert opinion report (**Guidelines for writing an Expert Opinion Report**).
- Executive summaries are provided in other contexts too (e.g. to communicate the relevant results of studies, discussions, meetings or conferences).

How long is an executive summary?

Executive summaries should be as short as possible, without being as short as an abstract in a research article. One or two pages (of text) is fine, three okay and four pages the maximum. In rare cases, for very extensive studies, executive summaries might be longer.

B) Elements of an executive summary

Short executive summaries usually do not have different sections but only a few paragraphs. However, as sections and subtitles help to structure the text and help to communicate the

message, longer executive summaries should be subdivided into sections.

Structural principles for executive summaries

argument	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. context and question 2. main arguments 3. answer and implications
abstract	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. introduction 2. material and methods 3. results 4. conclusion
problem solution	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. situation (circumstances, conditions) 2. problem (shortcomings, open question) 3. solution (one or several solutions or answers) 4. evaluation (critical appraisal of solutions; is the question answered or the problem solved?)
additional recommendations	<p>If recommendations for actions are given in an executive summary, these are presented at the end. Sometimes bold type is used for these recommendations (Seely 2002).</p> <p>In some cases, dependent on topic or the approach of the author and/or client, definite recommendations are not given but different options with their advantages and disadvantages provided.</p>

An executive summary must be clear, concise & coherent¹

Clear	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Say exactly what you intend, in a way that is as clear as possible to the reader. • Use definite, specific, concrete language. • Use the active voice. • Put statements in positive form. • Express coordinate ideas in similar form (parallel construction of sentences). • Keep connected words in a sentence closely together (e.g. subject and verb).
Concise	Omit needless words, phrases, or whole sentences. Needless words are those that can be removed without significant loss of understanding.
Coherent	Make sure that information elements hold together so that the progress from one point to the next is logical and seems inevitable.

¹from Strunk & White (2000) and Seely (2002)

Additional points to consider when writing an executive summary



- paragraphs
- Cover one idea, aspect or topic per paragraph.
 - The first sentence in a paragraph introduces the topic of that paragraph (topic sentence).
 - The last sentence summarizes points discussed and prepares the reader for the next paragraph.
- tense
- The present tense is easiest to understand. If possible, use the present tense throughout the executive summary (possible exception: description of applied methods).

C) Preparing an executive summary in 9 steps

stage	step	
prepare	1. complete the expert opinion report or study on which the executive summary is based	<input type="checkbox"/>
	2. define the key points and the main message	<input type="checkbox"/>
outline	3. develop the structural outline	<input type="checkbox"/>
draft	4. write the first draft in one sitting	<input type="checkbox"/>
revise	5. revise the draft (Is it clear, concise, coherent?)	<input type="checkbox"/>
	6. ask somebody for feedback	<input type="checkbox"/>
	7. revise the text again (several cycles of feedback and revision increase text quality)	<input type="checkbox"/>
	8. correct grammar, spelling, punctuation	<input type="checkbox"/>
	9. adjust the layout	<input type="checkbox"/>

Make sure to have enough time for the feedback and revision process. As executive summaries are read by many people, and as they may influence important decisions, it is very important that executive summaries are well worded.

D) Examples of high-quality executive summaries (biological and environmental sciences)

The following three executive summaries differ substantially in format, length and use of images and figures. We suggest you spend a moment looking at each one and then choose one of them to see how they have used the text to convey their science and recommendations.

Executive summary of conference outcome

- Tripp, R. (2003). How to cultivate a commercial seed sector. Executive summary of one of the contributions to the Sahel Agricultural Symposium 2003 “Sustainable Agriculture in the Sahel: Lessons and Opportunities for Action” (Institute du Sahel, Mali and Syngenta Foundation for Sustainable Agriculture, Switzerland): http://syngentafoundation.org/pdf/cultivate_commercial_seed_sector.pdf (1 page).
- The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) (2006). Summary of the Second Global Biodiversity Outlook: <http://www.cbd.int/doc/meetings/cop/cop-08/official/cop-08-12-en.pdf> (7 pages; 6 pages text)

Executive summary of in-depth study

- Gianni, M. (2004). High Seas Bottom Trawl Fisheries and their Impacts on the



Zurich – Basel
Plant Science Center

Biodiversity of Vulnerable Deep-Sea Ecosystems: Options for International Action. Executive Summary. IUCN, Gland, Switzerland.
http://cmsdata.iucn.org/downloads/hs_bottomtrawling_execsumm.pdf (15 pages; 5 pages text)

E) References

Seely, J. (2002): Writing reports. One Step Ahead series. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 120 pp.

Strunk, W., White, E.B. (2000): The elements of style. Fourth edition. Longman Publishers, New York, 105 pp.