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RESEARCH GUIDELINES

WRITING AN EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

WHY MASTER THIS SKILL?

Many more people will read the executive summary of a report than will read either all or even part of it. The summary is the bridge between the often-technical arguments and findings of the main report, and the target audience, whether media, decision makers or aid professionals. A concise and well-written summary will draw readers into the main report. If it is effective, it will be cited by others and used as the basis for their own summaries of your findings.

Yet all too often, it is dashed off as an afterthought, badly written and missing some of the best nuggets in the main report. What a waste! In terms of readership and impact, you should spend a great deal of time and care on the executive summary, not a begrudging half hour at the end of months of work.

Here are some ideas on how to get it right, or at least not as wrong.

WHO SHOULD WRITE IT?

It may be better, if you can, to ask someone with a media or communications background to draft the executive summary (the author should of course also check and revise the draft). A fresh pair of eyes will be closer to the mindset of the eventual reader: they will spot what's interesting and new, they are more likely to avoid jargon and specialist vocabulary, and they do not hate the report like the author probably does by now. If you're a one-person outfit without the luxury of a second pair of eyes, at least get a good night's sleep and perhaps spend a day working on something else to clear your head before starting in on the executive summary.

WHAT SHOULD YOU WRITE?

Try and keep the summary to a maximum of two pages – one sheet of double-sided paper. Don't cheat by shrinking the font – if anything it should be larger than for the main report. If the summary is more than two pages long, you will lose readers fast. If you can get it down to a single page, or even a single paragraph – for example, if there is one stand-out finding from the report – then so much the better.

The first paragraph should be a summary of the executive summary – crucial to getting and keeping the readers' attention (imagine a tired journalist skimming a dozen incoming reports, or someone in front of a computer scanning their RSS feed – what makes them keep reading, rather than moving on to the others?). So it should first say what is new or interesting in the report, plus the conclusions – that's what will keep people reading.

Next establish your *bona fides*: why should people trust your organization/author on this topic?

Then decide: What problem does the report address, and what methodology does it use?

Be sure to identify and import any killer facts or particularly striking graphics from the main report.

Finally, add a few of the main recommendations, but not a long list.

HOW SHOULD YOU WRITE IT?

A handy way to help yourself write is to imagine someone asking, 'That thing you said you were writing – what was it about?' You've got their attention, so now come up with an answer that inspires them and leaves them with something memorable.

Writing from scratch is usually better than cut-and-paste.

If you are a new pair of eyes, first interview the author to get their views on what is new or interesting. They will know both the report and the other literature on the topic far better than anyone else in the organization.

Then start with the original full report (not the terms of reference (TOR) or the original concept note – they should have been superseded by the report). Read it carefully, particularly the first and last sentences of each paragraph. Highlight key words or ideas (even if you're the original author, this may be a worthwhile exercise), as well as killer facts and good graphics.

Using these prompts, construct the strongest narrative possible. If you have trouble doing so, that may be because the report itself is not clear, either in arguments or structure – writing the executive summary can often lead to tweaking the main report, so you may need to go back to the author on this.

Ideally, the main report and the executive summary can be even more closely interwoven. If the report has well-defined sections, it can be a good discipline to draft part of the summary as you complete each section. This is relatively painless if you have followed advice to conclude each section with a short and succinctsummary of the main takeaways. You can always come back and amend it later, taking the context of the whole report into account.

Re-read it, test it and get others to read it and comment on what does and does not make sense. If you're a fresh pair of eyes, ask the author to fact-check it and point out any key omissions. Take your time – this is the most critical part of the report.

THINGS TO AVOID

- Do not introduce the structure of the main report, e.g. 'In section one, we discuss the context of X'. The executive summary needs to work as a stand-alone document.
- Do not introduce new ideas, references or arguments in the summary.
- Don't oversell – sprinkling hype (terms such as 'groundbreaking', 'breathtaking', 'extraordinary', 'outrageous') through the summary will put people off. Substance, not superlatives, is what will persuade them to keep reading.
- Keep jargon and acronyms to an absolute minimum, and explain their meaning the first time you use them. In particular, minimize the use of development-speak. Keep in mind George Orwell's guide to how to write.

A FINAL THOUGHT

A first step towards cutting out redundant language would be to start calling the summaries of our reports just that, rather than 'executive' summaries!

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Here are some examples of good and bad executive summaries from the business world.

From academia, here is 'the best abstract ever' (and almost certainly the most succinct!)

See also Oxfam's research guidelines on 'Writing for impact: lessons from journalism' and 'Creating killer facts and graphics'.

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Oxfam GB, Oxfam House, John Smith Drive, Cowley, Oxford, OX4 2JY, UK.

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