

Tips for Writing an Executive Summary

An Executive Summary summarizes the key points of a lengthy research report or publication. Although research reports are often highly technical in nature, the goal of an Executive Summary is to communicate in a simple manner so that the information can be understood by all readers, regardless of their knowledge or expertise. The Executive Summary is used by managers to understand the broader policy context of research and make decisions about changes to policies, programs, or investment decisions.

Typically, an Executive Summary is 3-6 pages in length. A longer summary is often used when it contains charts or other illustrations. The Executive Summary should be organized according to the following categories – Project Summary, Background, Process, Finding and Conclusions and Recommendations for Action. Following is a description of the type of information to consider for each of these categories. It is not intended to be an exhaustive listing of the type of information that is appropriate to convey—these are examples to help you think about key items that should be communicated.

PROJECT SUMMARY

What is the research project and why was it conducted?

- Provide a brief (2-3 sentence) description of the project.
- What is the problem or issue?
- What is the purpose of the research?

BACKGROUND

What is the history of the research?

- Did a specific event or issue provide the impetus for the research?
- Is this a second or third phase to earlier research conducted by us or someone else?
- Is this a “first-of-its-kind” research project?

Who was involved?

- Was this research done as part of a national research program?
- Was this a partnership with other states? Which states?
- Was this a pool-funded project?
- Was it done in cooperation with a university? Which?
- Was it done in cooperation with local units of government? Which?
- Was it done in partnership with private organizations? Name them.

PROCESS

What process was used to conduct the research?

- Provide a brief (2-3 sentence) description of the research process.
- What was the length of the research – number of months or years?
- Was the process designed to be compatible with other research?
-

What type of data was collected?

- How was the data collected?
- Did it involve surveys? Describe.
- Did it involve sampling? Describe.
- Did it involve test sections? Describe type and location.
- Where was the data collected? Name the specific counties or highways.
- Were any unusual collection techniques or equipment used?

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

What were the major findings or results?

- Provide a brief (2-3 sentence) description of the most significant findings.

Was a cost/benefit analysis conducted?

- Is there a simple way to quantify the results?
- Does the research provide a snapshot of before and after comparisons?
- What are the practical benefits of this research for WisDOT customers?
- Does the research provide a way to reduce costs? Explain.
- Does the research improve safety? Explain.
- Does the research increase productivity? Explain.
- Does the research improve operational efficiencies? Explain.
- Does the research improve customer service? Explain.
- Does the research reduce congestion or travel times? Explain.
- Does the research provide a smoother ride? Explain.
- Does the research provide better information to make policy-based decisions?
- Is the new practice worth the investment? Explain how you measured the trade-offs?
- Does the research indicate what NOT to do?

What are the policy implications?

- Do the findings impact existing federal regulations?
- Do the findings impact other states?
- Do the findings impact local units of government?
- Can the findings be used as a national model?
- Do the findings indicate a new best practice?
- Do the findings identify emerging new issues or trends?

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER ACTION

What future steps are needed in both the short-term and long-term?

- Explain how the findings will be transferred into actual policy or program changes.
- What needs to be done before the research results can be implemented?
- Is additional study needed?
- Are additional resources needed?
- Are there unresolved issues?
- Do manuals or guidelines need to be changed?
- Are legislative changes needed?
- Are changes needed to existing specifications or procedures?
- Does the research point to the need for new technology investments?

Who is responsible for implementation?

- Does it require action by WisDOT management?
- Will implementation depend on new or existing partnerships? With whom?
- Will it depend on legislative or Congressional action?
- Will it depend on federal regulatory changes?
- Who is the WisDOT contact for more information?

How will the results of the research be communicated?

- Should there be a workshop or training?
- Will there be information in newsletters?

WRITING AND STYLE

When writing the Executive Summary it is best to keep the writing and style simple and concise. Following are a few reminders for good communications:

- Use simple short words unless only the long words fit your needs.
- Keep sentences short (15-20 words).
- Avoid technical jargon and acronyms. If a technical word is absolutely necessary, define it for the reader. For instance if the research involves rubblization – explain it.
- Keep numbers simple. Round them off when possible (\$8.4 million instead of \$8,421,500). Use charts to show comparisons or trends.
- Weed out unnecessary words, clichés and overused buzzwords.
- Substitute active verbs for “to be” verbs. For instance, “the program achieved its goals” instead of “program goals were achieved.”
- Write as you talk, use everyday language. Avoid stuffy, halting sentences.
- Keep the tone friendly, informal, matter-of-fact.
- Use examples that are familiar to the reader.
- Always proofread and spell check the document.