

WRITING AN EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

An executive summary is a short, clear summary of your evaluation or research. It is a key tool in communicating your research and is the part of the report that is the most likely to be read, circulated and used. Writing a summary that is focused and clear, and delivers the key message of the project, is a real skill. So, first consider:

Can you find someone else to do it?

Writing summaries uses a specific skillset – people with professional communication or editing skills might be best placed to write it. Is there someone who can write the summary for you? If not, it's easier to write a summary with distance from the project. So try to have a good break from the report before you start writing the summary.

4 RULES

1. KEEP IT SHORT

The summary has to be quick to read for very busy people – so you really need to make sure it's no more than two pages.

2. USE PLAIN LANGUAGE

Your summary needs to be readable for as many people as possible. Avoid complicated acronyms and technical jargon, and keep the vocabulary simple.

3. TEST IT OUT

Make sure you get someone who hasn't read the report or been involved in the project to read the draft summary. Ask them to be very honest and straightforward in their feedback and tell you if anything is not clear.

4. HIGHLIGHT **THE KEY FACTS**

The executive summary needs to grab attention, and highlight the main findings and any particularly striking facts, figures, models or images. Ask yourself if you had just a few minutes to explain your project to someone – what three things would you tell them?

Things to include

Your summary will need some background, and the reasons why you undertook the research. Make sure to cover the key points below – but they might be in a different order for your project and your audience.

What did you find out?

Include the main findings of the project and key facts. You don't need to include every finding – prioritise!

Why is it important? What needs to change or happen as a result?

Why do people need to know about your research, and what do you want to happen? You can include recommendations but be selective and prioritise. Are they clear, targeted and based on your findings?

Who needs to pay attention?

Think about the audience for your report, and say who needs to take note or action.

How did you find it out?

Include an overview of your collection and analysis methods and any limitations of the report, to show that your findings are sound. You don't need details, just key points.

Where can people find out more? Make sure people know where to find the report, and how to contact you.