

# Executive Summary Guidelines

## A Communications Program Workshop

This workshop teaches the basic strategies and structure for an effective executive summary for a briefing book or an extended policy paper. The executive summary is the most important part of a policy paper because it synthesizes complex data into a succinct and coherent whole that allows a decision-maker or general reader in a few minutes of reading to glean the problem, supporting evidence, and solutions. As such, the executive summary is often the most difficult part of the policy paper to write.

Yet there are basic steps that will help turn complex ideas into succinct and powerful arguments that will capture the attention of a busy reader. You will, for example, need to state explicitly not only the current problem but also your findings; you'll want to signal some of the pros and cons of your reasoning for change, and highlight your key findings and recommendations.

### The Structure of the Executive Summary

Once you have determined your dominant findings and recommendation/s, you are ready to structure your memo and draft an initial version of the executive summary. The executive summary highlights the problem and recommendations but also serves as a road map into the structure of your memo, allowing the reader to follow the course of your analysis. The executive summary does *not* chronicle the story that lies behind the problem nor does it track the development of your research. It telegraphs your key recommendations, relying on your authority as a policy analyst. It summarizes your key points for a busy reader and highlights the recommendations in a memorable way to guide future discussions.

After you have finished your research, it can help to write a draft of the executive summary as a structuring device for the longer paper. You will return to the executive summary again at the end of the writing process for the full paper, revising it to make sure that it matches your analysis, findings, and ultimate recommendations. Even a short, two-page memo can benefit from a brief executive summary that foregrounds the recommendations or findings discussed later in the body. (See Gilroy, "Big Picture on Army Recruitment," as an example at the end of this presentation.)

In telegraphic style, explain who the target audience is (i.e., the decision-maker for your policy proposal), clarify the problem, and describe the main points that the decision-maker should know.

Core characteristics of the Executive Summary—all in brief:

#### WHO and WHAT

1. **WHO** is the key stakeholder? Who is the target **audience** and what is the intended **use** of the paper?
2. **WHAT** is the problem or issue either in terms of current policy or as a problematic situation?

#### WHY and WHAT

3. **WHY** is change needed?

4. **WHAT** are the policy options? / **What are your findings on the issue?** Sign post the pros and cons of each option or summarize findings. As you introduce or describe the findings, you might also briefly summarize the methodology used to compile and examine the data.

#### HOW and WHAT

5. **How can the client take action? Recommends** primary course/s of action.
6. **What are your supporting reasons** for selecting or highlighting that course of action. You might introduce the recommendations with a “So what?” or central goal in mind. You might also include a timeline for action.

#### WHY

7. Why is this urgent? You may **state urgency** in a short concluding line or two.

Note that these characteristics answer the core questions a decision-maker must know immediately: **WHO, WHAT, WHY,** and **HOW,** with **WHEN** and **WHERE** included where necessary.

#### Examples of Executive Summaries

These examples highlight excellent formats, ranging from short findings to extensive international policy recommendations.

- Prize-winning PAE: Erica Han and Lymari Morales (2007), Understanding Muslim Populations: What Leaders Need to Know, [http://www.hks.harvard.edu/var/ezp\\_site/storage/fckeditor/file/pdfs/degree-programs/oca/pae-han-morales-understanding-muslim-populations.pdf](http://www.hks.harvard.edu/var/ezp_site/storage/fckeditor/file/pdfs/degree-programs/oca/pae-han-morales-understanding-muslim-populations.pdf)
  - This policy analysis paper synthesizes and prioritizes its findings, offering recommendations as subsets. Many clients are more fascinated by a PAE-writer’s survey of the problem than they are interested in the writer’s conclusions and recommendations. This paper offers a way of meeting the client’s immediate interests without losing sight of recommendations.
- Prize-winning PAE: Mamie Marcus (2007), *Immigrant Voters in Massachusetts: Implications for Political Parties*,
  - [http://www.hks.harvard.edu/var/ezp\\_site/storage/fckeditor/file/pdfs/degree-programs/oca/pae-marcuss-immigrant-voters-in-massachusetts.pdf](http://www.hks.harvard.edu/var/ezp_site/storage/fckeditor/file/pdfs/degree-programs/oca/pae-marcuss-immigrant-voters-in-massachusetts.pdf)
  - This policy analysis paper first highlights the findings, building on them for the subsequent recommendations.
  - Take note of the set up of the initial problem. How could it be improved?
- Sorby Grant and Anadel Koester (2011), *IBM CityForward*
  - <https://coursepages.knet.hks.harvard.edu/sites/6653/Lists/Course%20Materials/Attachments/4/Grant,%20Koester.pdf>
  - This policy analysis paper introduces recommendations in buckets according to broad themes. Each broad issue has subset recommendations and timelines. Note

the introductory paragraph to the recommendations section, which reminds the decision-maker/reader of the big picture goal for the recommendations.

- The conclusion returns to the “So what?” with specific stakeholders in mind. How could the conclusion enhance the sense of importance or urgency without hyperbole?
- Jennifer Stoff and Lindsey Berger (2011), *Most Effective Measures, Most Effective Rollout: Implementing Massachusetts’ Teacher and Principal Evaluation Framework*
  - Soon to be available on course website.
  - The Forward allows the writers to describe the project and establish context and motivations based on the broader social issue. Why do the writers introduce a Forward, rather than relegating these issues to the “Introduction” or “Background” section?
  - The Executive Summary is presented in the form of Recommendations supported by individual findings.
- Lengthy professional white paper: Pew Center, Asia Society. January 2009. “A Roadmap for U.S.-China Cooperation on Energy and Climate Change,”  
<http://www.pewclimate.org/US-China>
  - This report presents a vision and a concrete roadmap for U.S.-China collaboration focused on reducing greenhouse gas emissions to mitigate the effects of climate change. The report begins with a “Forward” that highlights the importance of a collaboration between the U.S. and China as key leaders in negotiating climate change policy.
  - The Forward allows the writers to state key goals and key motivations before embarking on the specifics enumerated in the Executive Summary.
  - The Executive Summary explicitly names basic assumptions for the rationale supporting the methodology, findings, and recommendations. Without those assumptions, readers will not be persuaded of the report’s ultimate recommendations. The Executive Summary then advocates its major recommendations before moving on to explicit findings with second-level, more specific recommendations. The conclusion to the Executive Summary underscores the urgency of following its recommendations both in a negative sense—what will happen if China and the U.S. do *not* act on these recommendations—and in a positive sense—what will happen if China and the U.S. *do* act on the recommendations. While conclusions are not mandatory for executive summaries, they do allow you to return to the big picture, the broad goal, or the motive of your policy recommendations.

## Resources

### General Texts on Policy Analysis:

- Bardach, Eugene. 2000. *A Practical Guide for Policy Analysis*. New York: Chatham House Publishers.
- Stokey, Edith and Richard Zeckhauser. 1978. *A Primer for Policy Analysis*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company.

- Smith, Catherine F. 2010. *Writing Public Policy*. Oxford UP.
- Weimer, David L. and Aidan R. Vining. 1992. *Policy Analysis: Concepts and Practice*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall.

HKS and other online resources:

- Communications Program, Writing Skills Handouts (log-in necessary), <http://ksgnotes1.harvard.edu/comm/handout.nsf/504ca249c786e20f85256284006da7ab?OpenView&Start=1&Count=30&Expand=2#2>
- PAE “Standards for Good Analysis,” Harvard Kennedy School of Government, <http://www.hks.harvard.edu/degrees/oca/students-alumni/pae/guide/standards-for-good-analysis>
- Policy Analysis Exercise Guide (This is the handbook for PAE writers that offers guidelines for all aspects of a strong policy paper, including the executive summary): [http://ksgnotes1.harvard.edu/comm/handout.nsf/504ca249c786e20f85256284006da7ab/d7ca3946b85b8aa8525773d006b7515/\\$FILE/PAE%20WRITING%20GUIDE%202009.pdf](http://ksgnotes1.harvard.edu/comm/handout.nsf/504ca249c786e20f85256284006da7ab/d7ca3946b85b8aa8525773d006b7515/$FILE/PAE%20WRITING%20GUIDE%202009.pdf)
- “Policy Paper Guidelines,” International Relations Department, Boston University, <http://www.bu.edu/ir/graduate/current/papers/policy/>