

CONCISE AND PRECISE: A CASE FOR THE EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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For most people, the thought of reading a lengthy request for proposal (RFP) or technical document is not exactly fun. No one has the time to review every single detail. That's why we crave a concise, targeted executive summary.

Executive summaries often precede a longer document, such as a business plan, grant proposal, study or report. They can be one page or more than five, depending on the need. Having an executive summary is critical because it may be the only thing your busy audience actually reads.

Begin at the Beginning...or the End

Where do you start when it's time to write an executive summary? First, consider your audience and think about how you can tailor it to their needs. Next, think about your goals. What do you want to achieve by writing this summary? Maybe you want to guide the reader to a specific conclusion or action. Perhaps you are trying to summarize critical information. Or maybe you are explaining how your product, service or experience is the right element to win a contract. In any case, be sure you understand your reader and your goals for the project.

When do you write the executive summary? That's up to you. Sometimes it's easier to write it after your main document is done, then you can use the summary to call attention to specific areas within the document. When you write the summary last, you have time to think things through clearly and pick out the key details to underscore. Other times, your strategy for the project will drive the executive summary and you will want to write it first. As you clarify your most important point (like features and benefits), you can use those to guide your summary and then shape the main document.

Pieces of the Puzzle

What goes into an executive summary? You may or may not actually summarize your larger document, but here are some common elements:

- An introduction detailing you or your organization
- An introduction of partners who will help you, emphasizing how you offer even more when you work together
- Highlights of the benefits your offer
- Your competitive advantage
- Proof of how you meet any selection criteria or goals
- Details that emphasize why you are the right partner, provider, etc. for the job
- Key information that shows the value you bring in relation to a problem or challenge
- References to specific sections in the main document that provide supporting detail

Bringing Everything Together

What sort of format should an executive summary take? Maybe a letter will set the right tone. Or perhaps a two-page document with bullet points, a few graphics and smart callouts will help reinforce key points and add interest. As you write, use a format that best speaks to your audience and supports your goals.

Sometimes building your summary around a theme is an effective approach. Using a theme can illustrate how well you understand the organization you're addressing. For example, you may stress:

- Shared values
- Mission/vision statement
- Key goals
- Quotes from executives within the organization

Start Writing Now

Ready to start that executive summary now? If you are still staring at a blank page, here are some other resources to help you get started:

- "The Art of the Executive Summary," http://blog.guykawasaki.com/2006/04/the_art_of_the_.html
- Colorado State Writing Guides: How to Write and Executive Summary
<http://writing.colostate.edu/guides/documents/execsum/index.cfm>
- Capture Planning, "How to Write an Executive Summary,"
http://www.captureplanning.com!/hc_executive_summary.cfm?

Still need some help? Contact the experienced High Point Creative team at 651-426-4012 to help create a concise, precise executive summary tailored to meet your project goals.