

Executive Summaries

Executive summaries quickly and clearly distill your main findings and help executive readers (such as CEOs, managers, or directors) make informed decisions. That's because these summaries convey the most crucial information in a way decision-makers are most likely to appreciate.

So how do executive summaries do that?

They're short. Summaries are typically one page, but can be up to 10% of the full report length.

They answer three key audience questions:

- | | | |
|----------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 |
| What should I know? | Why should I care? | What should I do? |

To create a concise document that addresses your readers' questions, here are a few tips:

Minimize Your Methods and Maximize Your Findings

Like many technical reports, executive summaries often follow the **IMRD** structure. This stands for Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion, the four main parts of a report. You can answer the three audience questions above in different parts of this structure:

Introduction (*What should I know about the issue? Why should I care?*)

Methods (*What should I know about your process? Why should I care?*)

Results (*What should I know about the main findings?*)

Discussion/Recommendations (*What should I do?*)

It's effective to emphasize your main findings in the executive summary, preferably in a paragraph's topic sentence. This often means *de-emphasizing* your methods. Unless your methods are your report's central focus, your executive audience will not likely need them to make a decision.

Accentuate the Bottom Line

Based on our three reader questions, you need to convince your audience why they should care about your main findings or recommendations. Connect what you found to the company's bottom line or mission. To explicitly identify this connection, here are some phrases you can use:

- "These findings are meaningful because..."
- "These findings' immediate impact is..."
- "These findings will allow our company to..."

One great way to accentuate the bottom line is to compare your results to something your readers know or use. Does your solution pass safety benchmarks? Is it cheaper than industry-standard methods? Is it more efficient? By how much? Include evidence that engages your core readers.

Design for Readability

While no two executives are the same, most want to understand your findings and implement your recommendations as quickly and efficiently as possible. Your executive summary should help them do this. Here are two strategies you can use to make your text more readable:

1. Use Bullet Points

Unlike in more formal academic writing, executive summaries permit and often encourage bullet points. Bullet points are useful when you need to list facts, provide motivation, or compare solutions.

2. Keep Paragraphs Short

Paragraph length affects readability. This means most executive summaries have several short paragraphs rather than one or two long ones.

Now let's utilize these principles to turn part of an ordinary executive summary into a precise, actionable paragraph!

BEFORE

Three translations were performed for compressive, tensile, and fatigue strength. Then, Level 3 of CES Edupak was used to find the optimal variant of each of the top eight materials. The three best materials were Titanium Alloys, Stainless Steel, and Boron Carbide. For titanium, the material selection was titanium alpha alloy, Ti6Al2Sn4Zr2Mo, duplex annealed, solution treated & aged. Because this analysis assumed that casting and forging processes were already in place for the Low-Alloy steel currently used, Boron Carbide was screened out as it did not fit with the existing manufacturing processes.

Doesn't lead with results

Unclear which option readers should pick

Doesn't offer a recommendation

AFTER

We found that **titanium alloy was the optimal con rod material** after examining both ceramics and metals. **Our results showed** that ceramics were vulnerable to fracture due to their extremely low toughness and resulted in extremely high cost parts. **Our results also showed** that titanium alloys had the **lowest mass** and the **highest fracture toughness** of all metals. We thus selected titanium alloy for our rod design. Here are our final design specifications:

Compares results to offer clear recommendation

Summarizes recommendation with concise bullet points

- **Recommended material:** forged alpha-beta alloy, Ti6Al2Sn2Zr2Mo
- **Hardening process:** solution treatment & aging
- **Radius:** 1.96 cm
- **Mass:** 1.08 kg
- **Cost:** \$25.84

Our recommended titanium alloy has 37% less mass than the company's current 1.25 CrMo low alloy steel design, with an only 4% cost increase.

Compares recommendation to alternatives