Writing an Executive Summary

Overview
An executive summary is the first thing that a reader sees when opening a business report. It condenses the report by summarizing the main body, including all data, analyses, and conclusions. Think of an executive summary as similar to an abstract for a research paper. They both give the reader a quick and clear overview of content.

Business reports are often prepared for a variety of reasons, and the intended audience may not always be familiar with the content or intent of the document. The executive summary thus states the objective(s), methods, data and analysis, and conclusions or recommendations, all in one page!

In real-world business reports, the executive summary is the most important page because it sets the tone for the rest of the document. It should interest your readers and give them incentive to read further. It should also contextualize the issue that is central to the document in a way that is understandable and relevant. Most importantly, it should contain all necessary information to guide decision-making.

Getting Started
Below are some prompts that will help you write an executive summary.

- What is the issue being investigated? Is this a funding plan being pitched to an investor? Is it a risk analysis for a government project? Be specific.
- What is the current situation and why has this report been prepared? State the objective of this document. Does it try and solve an important problem? Does it ‘change the world’?
- How was the analysis performed? Where was data collected from? What methods were used to interpret it?
- What can be inferred from the analysis? Are there any obvious trends?
- How is it relevant to the reader? Do the findings have any implications for the organization? From here on, the rest of the executive summary should
converge to address the objective of the report.

- **What are the recommendations?** This is possibly the most important paragraph in the entire report. A client hiring the services of a consultant will look to the recommendations to think about future actions. A manager may devote the next few days (or weeks) to a problem highlighted by staff as being of particular importance.

**Things to Keep in Mind**

An executive summary should not be written until the report that it summarizes is complete. It is necessary that all facts, figures and numbers in the body of the report have been reviewed, revised (if necessary), and finalized before being mentioned at the front of the report.

The executive summary is usually placed after the title page and before the table of contents. It is written in paragraph form, unless bullet points are essential for clarity.

**Writing a Good Executive Summary**

Although evidence based management is becoming the norm in today’s business world due to the availability of technology, decisions are still made by people. A business report piques interest about new opportunities, puts management into action, or qualitatively compares two or more entities to guide decision-making. In essence, business reports will use a persuasive tone to either encourage or discourage a particular action. An executive summary reflects this attitude by emphasizing the significance of the issue and the possible effectiveness of the recommendations by making them relevant to the reader.

**How Can We Help**

If you are working on an executive summary or a business report, our writing consultants can provide useful advice and guidance. You can book a one-on-one appointment or stop by during our drop-in hours.