

## Tips for Writing Executive Summaries

### Some guidance from UWP faculty member Dr. Nathaniel Williams

In undergraduate business writing classes, I use the terms "abstract" and "executive summary" interchangeably. Either way, however, it helps to remember the "executive" part of the audience: imagine you're writing to the busiest, most influential person in the organization. Their time is valuable, which means **every word counts**. You need to get right to the point and make your audience feel confident and enthusiastic about your ideas. These tips will help you do that.

1. Follow all guidelines exactly. Know the instructions and/or grant RFP inside and out. This includes detail-oriented items that may be specified including length, font, order of material and submission method.
2. Keep introductory material to a minimum, and get right to the point.
3. Save the marketing language for advertisers. Your document should be strong on facts and specific information. In other words, refrain from using too many generalisms, superlatives, or "feel-good" phrasings.

BAD EXAMPLE: "We use cutting-edge technology from our friends at UC Davis to provide a user-friendly and client-centered experience as customers purchase their tickets via broadband Internet."

BETTER EXAMPLE: "Using a program built by UC Davis computer scientists in Fall 2018, our customers can buy tickets to events online in two steps rather than the current industry standard of six steps."

4. If you do make a generalization, follow it up with facts. Phrases like "For example,..." and "...such as" can help.

EXAMPLE: "Pharmaceutical profits have drastically declined because of start-up costs. Last year, the average price to bring a new medicine to market was on average \$1.8 billion."

5. Avoid phrasings or punctuation that creates a frivolous tone, including most exclamation points, informalities, and emphatic phrasing.
6. Be precise. Don't say "some" when you can say "10%" or 22. Conversely, don't say "half the time" if you don't really mean 50%, or "a couple" if you don't literally mean "two."
7. Edit for repetition. Some abstract writers suggest that any one word or phrase should only appear twice in roughly 250 words of prose.

**TIP:** Use find/replace tool to search for words if you notice them cropping up frequently. (For example, I write "In fact" at the start of many sentences—not a bad way to highlight that I'm about to reinforce a supporting idea, but it sounds like a "tic" if I do it 7 or 8 times in a 20-page article.)

8. Edit for wordiness. Make sure you're phrasing things directly and concisely. Use the following methods:

- Look for word/phrases such as "that," "which," "of the" "to" and "for." If your sentence has more than one "that" or "of the", for example, it's a sign that it could be shorter.
- Look for action words (or verbs that could/should be the main action) and remove any "ing" versions of verbs. For example, "supporting the documentation process" could just be "documented" or "proofread."
- Eliminate wordy phrasings that often pose as "business tone." For example, don't say "due to the fact that," say "because."

SAMPLE: My project entails studying the under-recognized aspects of Edgar Allan Poe's business practices when he was the editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger*, particularly the influence of the money invested by shareholders in his choices of content. (38 words)

REVISED: My project uncovers the influence of shareholders on Edgar Allan Poe's editorial choices when he was *Southern Literary Messenger's* editor. (20 words)

9. Use **active voice** strategically, and think about whose action is most significant to convey the idea. For example, "The program will be used by clients to confirm insurance claims" is probably better written as "Clients will use our program to...."
10. Be positive. Don't lead with things you haven't done yet or don't know; instead emphasize what you've done.

BAD EXAMPLE: "Although our team has never developed an app using Gphones coding platform, we have created mobile web pages for 12 clients and won an award for our iPhone app. BAD EXAMPLE:

BETTER: "We have extensive mobile app creation experience, including 12 mobile web pages for clients and our award-winning iPhone app. These skills will transfer to the Gphone coding platform."