



TECHNICAL REPORT WRITING FOR ENGINEERS

WHY DO YOU NEED AN ABSTRACT?

Maurice Poole, Operations Maintenance Engineer, London Underground: The most useful part of any report is actually the exec summary, because the exec summary should always allow you to say, I want to read more. I want to understand what this is really saying to me. And I want to understand how people examined the subject matter, explored what they need to explore. What processes they've used to come up with the conclusions they have come up with.

Richard Summers, Associate Director, Arup: The executive summary is the most important part of a report. Hopefully, it's at the beginning of a report, and it'll enable you to read it, and then you know what you're actually going to find within the report. And yes, the conclusion may well be in that summary, but it then allows you to explore what's in the report, and how they've come to that summary.

Ronald Gulliver, Chartered Civil Engineer, Kier Construction: The executive summary should tell the reader the topic of the report, the general scope of the research and considerations that were given, and an indication of what the key outcome is. The reader needs to know very soon what they're going to read about, and what they're going to find out from it to know if it's worth reading more.

Jane Healey Brown, Associate Director, Arup: Some clients particularly like to have a quick overview, depends on the nature of the client. If they're a very technical client, they will want a lot more detail and are not really that worried about a technical summary or an executive summary. It depends on what they intend to use it for. If we're working with local authorities and they then, perhaps, want to brief colleagues, and particular elected members, then an executive summary would be very useful because that gives the headline messages that particularly a non-technical person, like an elected member, can then understand and use in their conversations with their electorate.

Professor Mike Hounslow, Vice President & Head of Faculty (Engineering), The University of Sheffield: When I read a report, I usually read it more or less backwards. Perhaps I'll read the summary first, then I'll go to the conclusion, then I look for the graphs and the equations. Then I'll go to the introduction to see how it all hangs together.



Dr Ziad Azar, Technical Project Manager/Design Engineer, Siemens: It is very important to focus on, what we call the abstract, which is the first part in the report. So you could get that information you expect to see in the report quite quickly. The abstract should give a summary of what work has been done, the reason behind that work, and the conclusion of that work.

Rick Arnell, Materials Application Engineer, Rolls Royce: Most reports that we write at Rolls Royce have an executive summary at the start, which is probably the most important part, because that is the bit that the higher level people will see and give them a brief synopsis of what's in there. It will capture everything that's in there, so the reader can immediately see what's useful and what's not.

I once heard about a lecturer at Sheffield University who made all his students write a haiku as an abstract because if you couldn't do that, then you couldn't condense down enough. You didn't know what you'd done enough. And so he said, write it as a haiku, or I'm not interested.