

# Executive Summary Writing Guide for Operating Agents

## About this guide

This writing guide has been produced to assist Operating Agents and their colleagues to maximise the impact of the work of the IEA Energy in Building and Communities Annexes on policies that deal with decarbonisation, resilient buildings and communities.

This guide helps academics to write for the specific audience of a policymaker, who will need to advise senior policy advisors or politicians and/or navigate an influential stakeholder.

This guide is one of five documents. The other four are:

- ***Policy Brief Writing Guide for Operating Agents***
- ***Policy Brief Template***
- ***Executive Summary Template***
- ***Communication Insights and Useful Resources for Operating Agents***

The two writing guides show/demonstrate how to use their respective templates. *Communication Insights and Useful Resources for Operating Agents* provides broader insights into planning and delivering compelling policy briefs and summaries, writing in plain English, using visuals, adapting the written materials for use in presentations, such as PowerPoint, and other useful resources and information.

A deeper Communication Masterclass course, including online learning modules, has also been developed

## Structuring information for policymakers, journalists and the wider community

Writing for time-poor non-academic audiences is the reverse of academic writing! This is important. Policy makers will be more interested in how your research can help them achieve their own deliverables than your research process. The “Reverse Pyramid” or “Inverted Pyramid” is the heart of good communication for general audiences and the opposite of the way researchers are trained to write.

### Writing for journals and academic audiences

#### The Pyramid



### Writing for non-academic audiences

#### The Reverse Pyramid



### Writing for policymakers and non-academic audiences



## What is an executive summary?

An executive summary presents the state of knowledge on a specific topic to a non-academic audience. It provides a summary of the relevant, evidence-based research findings to ensure the reader is well informed on the subject of interest. An executive summary is:

- A stand-alone document or an introduction summarising a longer report.
- Focused on a single topic.
- Aim for about 2 pages or 700 - 750 words.

Two pages is the appropriate length for journalists, politicians, senior executives and policymakers to comprehend and for them to take action.

Executive summaries do not replace a technical report; rather they distil the lessons learned from the research and provide a vehicle for providing valuable information to decision makers such as senior executives and politicians, who are in the position to use the research to benefit society.

Although executive summaries summarise the research, **they are not to be confused with academic abstracts**. Journalists and decision makers are interested in the application and implications of the research, not the methods and processes involved (see 'The Reverse Pyramid' on the previous page). They can include information about policy options if applicable.

Information that is important to your audience needs to come first, such as potential benefits, impact and outcomes.

## Executive Summary sections

An executive summary is a digest of a longer, more detailed report, written in non-academic, accessible language. It is located within the first few pages of a longer report. An executive summary should also be able to stand alone and could be used as a source for media stories. It can also be used to communicate important or urgent interim findings such as a 'research update' for policy makers ahead of the completion of a research project and its technical reports.

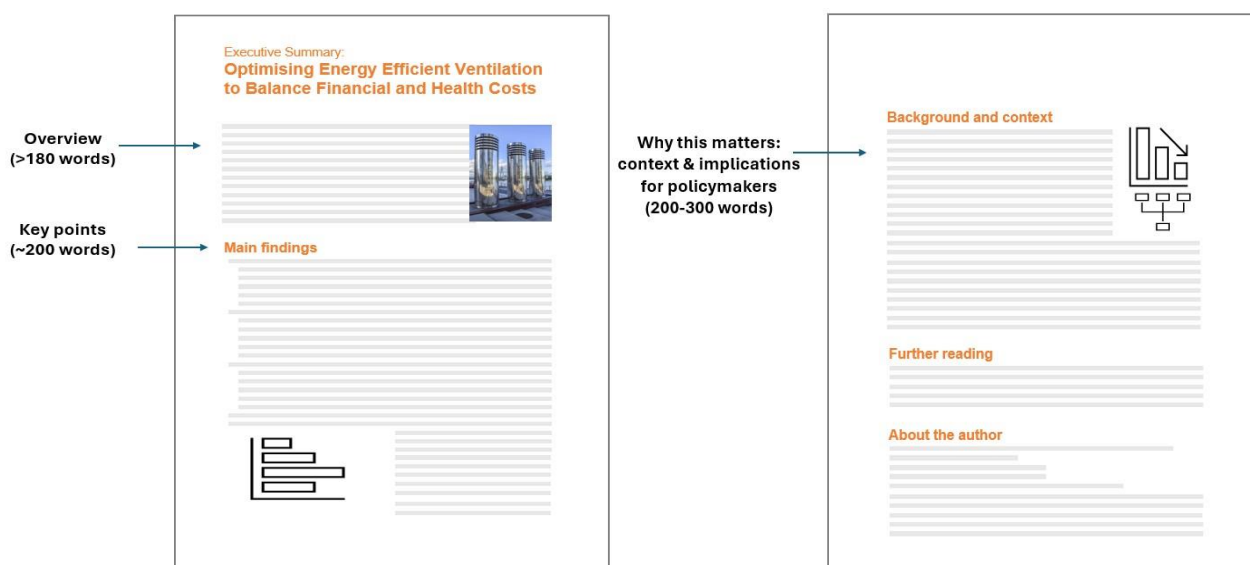
An executive summary is brief – two A4 pages or approximately 700 words (or 350 words per page), including space for images, figures and tables. **The longer the document, the less likely the audience is to read it.**

An executive summary should have five sections:

1. **Overview of issue:** An overview of the issue for busy readers. It states the issue or defines the problem this research is trying to solve in one or two sentences. The overview should contain everything the reader needs to know if this is all they read.
2. **Key findings for decision makers:** This section details the most important points and research findings to draw to the attention of the senior executive or journalist.

These first two sections should be on the first page.

3. **Background and context:** This section supports the key findings from the previous section with evidence from research and important background information. Describe why the findings matter and present them in the context of the policymaker's work and responsibilities.
4. **Further reading**
5. **About the author**



## What to include in each section

### One line title

- This should describe what this Executive Summary is about. Be specific. It should *not* be the full Annex title – that would be too general and may include technical terminology the reader may not be familiar with.
- It should convey the report's topic and how that could lead to something of public value.
- Examples:
  - *Executive Summary: How Improving Building Ventilation Can Reduce Energy Bills and Improve Our Health*
  - *Research Update: Grid Integration Software for Fair and Affordable Electricity Use*

### Overview of issue

150 – 180 words or 25% of the document

- This section provides an overview for busy readers. It needs to summarise what the problem that needs solving is, what the document provides an evidence-base for, why it is important for the policymaker, and what can be found in the main report. For example, understanding new information important to their work, such as the energy efficiency implications of a new or emerging type of phase change material.
- This section should:
  - Distil the essence or key message of the Executive Summary
  - Directly relate to the interests of the reader
  - Lead into the key findings
  - Appear near the top of the first page
  - Be written last
- This section can be presented in a box to emphasise its importance.
- Option: Include a simple graph or diagram which illustrates the most significant key finding/s. This should clearly show units of measurement and be accessible to a generalist audience. Well-designed graphs can have an outsize influence where the topic relates directly to a known social problem or challenge.

### Key findings for policymakers

200 words or 35% of the document

- Summarise the key findings in 3 to 4 listed points.
- Highlight what is new or different in this research – what does it show that we did not know before?
- Present the findings in order of significance and state why they are significant.
  - Are there findings at the social level – are there greater health, financial or other risks to the population than previously thought?
  - Are there findings at the economic level, is there a way for society to save money?
  - Are there findings at the policy level – is there a challenge or opportunity that is larger or different in nature to how it is currently being addressed by policymakers, manufacturers, or standards writing agencies?
- State findings clearly and unambiguously, without explaining methodology or any caveats around the certainty of results.
- An exception includes a finding that research can determine something with certainty, where previous research could not.
- The weight of your expert opinion determines whether a finding should be listed here, **unnecessary background information detracts from comprehension of the finding.**
- Specify the findings of the research:
  - What does this mean for the population at large?
  - Are people suffering a negative consequence we were not aware of? Are they at greater risk of something?
  - Could money be saved by doing something differently?
  - Can you quantify costs or benefits (even approximately)? Specify how many lives are at risk, what percentage emissions will this save, how much money is at stake, and/or how these numbers will change over time under different scenarios.

**Remember that YOU are the expert. Provide your unvarnished opinions with confidence.**

**Write strong, active statements that convey your authority.**

### Making the ‘public value’ meaningful

*Terms like “carboxyhaemoglobin (COHb) concentration”, “ecosystem services”, or “ground-based albedo modification” may be poorly understood outside of expert circles. Articulate the public value of your research in terms that resonate more strongly or are more meaningful to policymakers, politicians and non-academics:*

- Public **health benefits**, such as improved air quality
- **Emissions reductions** articulated using well-recognised carbon accounting standards
- **Affordability and financial benefits**, such as reduced infrastructure costs, reduced **cost of living** from lower energy bills, or growth opportunities for businesses
- **Social benefits**, such as programs that address inequality
- **Wellbeing, lifestyle, and liveability** benefits.

### Background and context

200 - 300 words or 40% of the document

This section:

- Connects the key findings/recommendations from the previous section with more detailed insights and important background information.
- Explains the significance or urgency of the topic – indicate why policymakers need to read this report now.
  - Quantify or describe what is at stake, such as financial costs for householders or governments, carbon emissions, social impact, or health costs or benefits.

- A graphic or key statistics in bold may help present this information. Source statistics that are relevant to the policymaker and their region. For example, writing an executive summary on resilient cooling for policymakers in the United Kingdom can be enhanced by including references to local death [statistics](#): “During summer 2022, there were an estimated 2,985 (2,258 to 3,712) all-cause excess deaths associated with 5 heat episodes, the highest number in any given year”.
- Explains why you are researching this topic: what is the main challenge/opportunity for society that this research addresses? Explain the policy context.
  - Is there a dominant discourse or understanding of this topic that a generalist audience would be aware of, and does this research challenge or reinforce it?
- Who will benefit from addressing this opportunity? Who will not benefit from addressing this opportunity? Who is disadvantaged by not addressing this opportunity?
  - Quantify the value at stake (cost, carbon, productivity hours, lives lost, and so on).
- Briefly (in 1 or 2 sentences) explains how you did your research, what the process was, and what makes this accurate (for example, the sample size or sensitivity analyses).
- Outlines any next steps that you will now take as part of this research.

#### Further reading

- Provide information about the publications, such as technical reports or fact sheets, from the project or Annex that are specifically relevant to the policy brief. State the publication’s title and, if it is available online, include a link to its location.
- Be brief and relevant. Do not provide a long list of further reading, as this can create an impression that you are giving the reader more work to do.

#### About the author

- State the name of the Operating Agent, position, institution, contact details and the name of the Annex you’re involved with. This gives the brief credibility.
- You can also include other acknowledgements or disclaimers if needed. Include the standard paragraph about the IEA EBC programme.

Example:

This work was made possible by Annex XX: NAME of the International Energy Agency (IEA) Energy in Buildings and Communities (EBC) Technology Collaboration Programme and funded in part by XXXXX Research Council, grant no. YYYYYY.

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The IEA [Energy in Buildings and Communities Programme](#) is an international energy research and innovation programme in the buildings and communities field. It enables collaborative research and development projects among its 26 member countries. The programme provides high quality scientific reports and summary information for policymakers.

Visit: [www.iea-ebc.org](http://www.iea-ebc.org).

#### Incorporating visuals

Photographs, graphics and other visuals make policy briefs more comprehensible and persuasive for readers. Simple graphics and charts are especially useful if they can replace text-heavy descriptions.

Choose effective visuals for the type of information you would like to communicate.

- Bar or line graphs are preferable to data tables to illustrate findings.

- Photographs can make documents more powerful, appealing and inspiring. The subject matter is energy in buildings and communities is ultimately about people and their homes and workplaces. Do not be afraid to use images that illustrate this as they humanise the research and make a powerful connection with the reader.
- Include descriptive captions for photos and other visuals that explain the content to the reader.
- Use high quality images.

Use fonts, colours and visuals in accordance with the IEA EBC *Corporate Design* guide (March 2021) which can be found on the IEA EBC website.

The guide *Communication Insights and Useful Resources for Operating Agents* and the online learning modules provide more detailed help with understanding policymakers as the audience for your communication. This will help you understand the context the policymaker and/or your Annex are working in, choose additional information what will show the relevance of your research to their needs, and use language that will make your writing more accessible and impactful.



## ALCHEMY COLAB

The IEA EBC TCP Impact Masterclass was developed by Alchemy Colab, a team of science communication, education and built environment experts.

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