Writing an Executive Summary
for Senior Seminar Papers in Political Science

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The Political Science department requires that senior seminar papers include an executive summary. Like an abstract, an executive summary briefly summarizes the paper's goals, methods, and conclusions. In addition to the summary provided in an abstract, the executive summary provides a clear statement of policy recommendations, research findings, or desired actions.

A good executive summary is . . .

*Brief.* Since an executive summary is often intended for a policy maker, decision maker, or evaluator who might not have the time to read the entire paper, the summary must quickly but accurately summarize the paper. A good rule of thumb is that an executive summary should be no longer than 5% of the length of the total paper's text; thus, a paper of 20 pages (double spaced) would have an executive summary only one (double spaced) page long, and a 10-page paper would have a half a page summary. Shorter is better.

*Complete.* However, the summary should also be complete. Precisely because some end users of the paper might not read the entire text, the executive summary must include an accurate summary of the paper's intent, methods, evidence, and findings.

*Clear.* An executive summary should clearly describe the conclusions of the research, and if appropriate, the policy recommendations, required actions or possible decisions. The executive summary must never leave a reader in confusion as to the paper's conclusions, significance, or implications for the future.

Tips for writing an executive summary:

Wait until after you've completely finished your paper to write your summary. Then, (after you've completed all of the research, data collection, writing and revision) re-read your paper and write a true summary of what you've actually written, not what you had planned to write or had hoped to write. Try to view your paper from the perspective of an outsider. What is significant about this paper? Why would readers be interested in it?

Spend time polishing your executive summary. After all, you have only a very few words with which to demonstrate the importance, significance and contribution of your research. As the APA manual notes, "A well prepared abstract can be the most important paragraph in your article."

Further reading:


Sample Executive Summaries from Political Science Journals

Do Governors Matter? Budgeting Rules and the Politics of State Policymaking

CHARLES BARRILLEAUX, FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY
MICHAEL BERKMAN, PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY

Whether and how governors influence public policies in the U.S. is open to question. This research tests a model of gubernatorial influence on public policymaking in which gubernatorial power is conceived of the governor's power over the budgetary process relative to that of the state legislature. We argue that governors with greater control over the budget process will use those powers to deliver a higher proportion of policies that confer benefits to statewide versus more localized constituencies. As governors' electoral security increases, their willingness to support legislatively desired localized spending increases. Empirical results derived from pooled cross-sectional models largely support the models tested.

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There has not been much formal or empirical research on the impact of Cold War–era arms transfers on regional subsystems, and the work that has been undertaken is inconclusive: arms transfers appear, in some cases, to promote stability, but in other situations they are shown to be destabilizing. This study confronts the issue directly by developing and testing both stability and instability models of Superpower (U.S. and USSR) and third-country arms transfers. The models examine the effects of exported arms on the political and military relationships between three sets of rival importers—India-Pakistan, Iran-Iraq, and Ethiopia-Somalia—during the 1950–1991 period. Tests of the models with recently released arms trade data reveal that the weapons shipments of the U.S. and USSR were profoundly destabilizing, while those of third parties generally had little impact on subsystem political and military relationships. An intriguing exception to these patterns is the weapons transfers of the PRC, specifically to Pakistan: these are found to have lessened the military imbalance between Pakistan and India, suggesting that the PRC's reputation as an irresponsible exporter deserves further review.