

What Goes in a Thesis Abstract? An Executive Summary?

Abstract

Think of the abstract as a classified ad for your thesis, and one in which you are being charged by the word. An abstract briefly states your purpose, research question, methods, results, conclusions and recommendations. It gives readers just enough information to decide whether they want to read your thesis—it should pique their interest. Five sentences make for a good length (one each for research question, methods, results, conclusions, and recommendations). Be sure to include keywords tied to your research that can be searched in a database. Abstracts do not include parenthetical citations or footnotes.

An NPS thesis abstract is typically around 200 words. All theses, capstone and final project reports, and dissertations are required to contain an abstract.

Executive Summary

The executive summary is a highly condensed version of your thesis. It should be able to stand alone, independent of your thesis. Your executive summary should summarize your purpose, methods, results, conclusions and recommendations to allow someone who can read ONLY that document to walk away with a solid understanding of the overall purpose, scope, methods, and findings of the research. Some departments require inclusion of policy recommendations. Just as you need to properly cite others' ideas in your thesis body text, you should include citations in the executive summary if needed and a short List of References at the end.

Size recommendations for an executive summary vary but usually range from two to five pages, depending on NPS department. Too long is just as bad as too short; actual length is determined by content, concision, and completeness. The following departments require both an abstract *and* an executive summary:

Recommended length of executive summaries in theses, capstone and final project reports, and dissertations	
Department	# of Pages
Center for Homeland Defense and Security (CHDS)	2–3
Operations Research (OR)	2–3
Systems Engineering (SE)	2–3
Electrical and Computer Engineering (ECE)— <i>An Executive Summary is now optional in ECE. Please consult your primary advisor.</i>	2–5