

Effective Key points

A few years ago, we produced a Masterclass on writing great Executive Summaries.¹ We're now seeing more of a trend to producing what is effectively an Executive Summary in the form of Key points. So, we thought it was a good time to cover off some of the dos and don'ts of writing effective Key points.

Key points are effectively an Executive Summary

They are just written in a different form. But all the usual principles should apply. These are:

- Make sure the Key points get the paper off to a good start – it colours the readers' impression of the paper overall.
- Make sure they have impact – the problem or opportunity definition must be clear and indicate size, scale, and impact.
- Remember, sometimes it can be the only part of the paper that a Minister pushed for time might read. It also serves as a refresher to the paper as a whole, either just ahead of the meeting or the item being considered.
- Focus on the essentials.
- Don't repeat blocks of text from other parts of the paper – summarise any critical points.

Writing style is critical

Using dot points means that a less formal writing style is required. But should still promote crisp, clear drafting.

But, you need to work at it to keep it succinct and clear. It needs to be easy to read and understand at pace.

Use:

- Plain English.
- Short sentences.
- Short paragraphs. It's fine to have more than one sentence per dot point – but don't let them become more than a few lines.

- Limit the number of dot points. If anything, it should be shorter than a standard Executive Summary. Also, remember that without paragraph numbering (which they shouldn't usually need), they can be hard to navigate in a meeting setting.
- Use subheadings if it is getting a bit long or on multiple, but connected, topics.

Writing great Key points can be harder to do than 'normal' drafting. So, give yourself some time to draft and then polish your Key points. After all, they are one of the most critical parts of any paper, alongside the recommendations.

Think of the Key points as an elevator pitch or a short verbal introduction to the paper (for example, at the beginning of the discussion of the paper). This will help you further refine them, boil down the essentials of the paper, and yet not miss critical matters.

Avoid repetition

Don't repeat things at the beginning of the paper. It gets boring, wastes space and can turn off the reader. It can also be confusing if things are worded differently. Rules of thumb to consider are:

- If it's a really short paper, don't bother with Key points – use the Purpose statement to provide a super-summary instead. This should cover what the Minister or Government must decide or do, why, and when.²
- Avoid noting recommendations that repeat the content of the Key points unless they are formally required, e.g. in some statutory decision-making processes, they remain important.

Look at the Purpose statement, Key points and recommendations together – they should be a package. Make sure they aren't repetitive yet cover what's needed.

¹ Brief 3 Executive summaries <https://www.nzier.org.nz/learn/central-government>

² For example: "You need to sign the attached letters by 10 June to encourage these Board members to renew their terms."

At times we see advice papers where these three parts aren't clearly a package, e.g. the purpose of the paper might not be played out in the recommendations, or recommendations appear that aren't covered in the Key points. This seriously detracts from the quality of the paper and can worry the decision-makers. It can look like the advice hasn't been well thought through.

If it's a longer complex set of decisions – then use subheadings in the recommendations – and make them the same as any subheadings used in the Key points section.

Try this as a structure for your Key points section

As with a traditional Executive Summary, we suggest you focus on what you are recommending and why – rather than following the traditional structure of an advice paper (e.g. beginning with the background, problem definition and traversing your thinking before the recommendations come).



Make sure that the Key points are a focus of peer review

Peer review should give significant focus to the Key points section as it is one of the most important parts of the paper. Extra time spent will make a difference.

Things to focus on are:

- Is it easy to read and understand quickly?
- Does it cover the critical issues in the paper?
- Does it lead to the recommendations?
- Does it fit the purpose of the paper?
- Could it be shorter or tighter?

Try having a different peer reviewer look at the Key points once the paper is complete to ensure it stands alone and meets the needs of a time-pressured decision-maker.

Key points only papers

We also see short briefings written in Key points only (alongside some recommendations). Done well, these are highly effective and efficient ways of communicating information and making simple decisions. They can and should be done more often! A busy Minister will always appreciate this sort of advice.

They should follow all of the general points above – related to keeping things crisp, well structured, and leading into recommendations.

But choose this device carefully. This sort of paper shouldn't be used for complex issues or matters where there are many small issues to sort through.

Keep it short. A single page, or page and a half with subheadings, is about the maximum that can be read easily using dot points, and reading lots of dot points is harder to do than reading a similar sized piece of normal drafting.

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