

Finishing with a bang! Conclusions

The last words – use them carefully

In Masterclass 3 we discussed the importance of a carefully crafted Executive Summary, as first impressions count. A conclusion is your last chance to make an impact and to pull the arguments together. So, it needs to count too.

All too often we see papers fade out at the end with a long list of compliance type matters. The typical reader struggles through this and it leaves a messy impression of the point the paper is making.

A tight Conclusion pulls the paper together. It cements the key points into the mind of the reader. And leads into the recommendations or next steps.

Many commentators compare report conclusions to musical recordings. In some the same chord sequence is played over and over through to the finish – it just gets quieter! It fades away..... Others, however, finish with a bang. Something like “Stairway to Heaven” in which Robert Plant finishes with what is essentially a scream! Or most classical music which finishes with a crescendo!

The purpose is to lead decision-makers into the recommendations

The logic of a Conclusion is for it to be designed to wrap-up the arguments of the paper, and thus lead decision-makers smoothly into the recommendations.

A good Conclusion should:

- Tie back to the purpose of the paper and show that the paper delivers what was promised
- Summarise the most important arguments in the paper (it is definitely not the place to introduce new material)
- Highlight the key trade-offs or vital information
- Point to the action to be taken
- Indicate next steps.

While a really busy reader might only read the Executive summary and the recommendations, a slightly less busy one may also read the Conclusion.

You’ll notice that the Cabinet Office often pull through pieces from your Conclusion, as well as from the Executive summary

into their cover note, to make sure that the recommendations are well set up in context.

Try this as a shape for your Conclusion

Objective	•...in order to achieve....
Major points	•... because the logic is.....
Decisions	• ...we recommend that you.....

Conclusions need impact

Language is important. Short sentences and crisp paragraphs have greater impact. Pay attention to editing for focus as well as for ease of reading and comprehension when preparing or peer reviewing a Conclusion.

Strip off all the words, ideas and information that is not the core argument. Avoid background information or detailed process requirements unless central to the case.

Don’t just repeat the content of the paper, or of the Executive summary. Readers tend to skip over repetition and find it irritating.

Then, once it’s short, boil it down further. Any idea that cannot be compressed to a paragraph or two will struggle for air in a political debate. Cut to half a page or less for briefing papers and Cabinet papers. And for a short piece cut harder – the Conclusion should be proportional to the size of the paper.

If your paper is already down to an Executive summary or key points only, don’t add a Conclusion. At most include a closing dot point or sharp sentence. But make sure that any recommendations follow logically from the rest of the paper.

.....even if the recommendations are at the beginning of the paper

We know templates and organisational preferences differ.

Papers can have recommendations at the start, following the Executive summary/ Key points section, or at the end of the paper. (Cabinet papers’ recommendations are often repeated, appearing at the beginning on the Cabinet Office cover sheet, and then again at the end of the paper.)

But the logic remains.

For:

- Papers with recommendations at the end – the Conclusion is effectively introducing the proposals. So, its role is to smoothly lead in to the decision points and thus should be structured to reflect their organisation
- Papers with recommendations upfront – the Executive summary does the introduction. This leaves the Conclusion to tie the arguments together, showing why the earlier recommendations were made.

Writing the Conclusion first, or last?

Whichever way you choose, the thinking should all be done and the conclusions of the analysis clear before you start writing the paper. As we've said in previous Masterclasses, we call this the 50:50 rule: half of your time should be spent cracking the problem, and this should happen before you open the template on your computer. The other half is then devoted to considering how best to present the arguments and to writing the paper.

Some analysts even craft draft conclusions and recommendations first (perhaps along with an Executive summary), and only then write the rest of the paper. This way you are clear about where you are going, and can design the paper to move from the purpose to the Conclusion in the most expeditious manner.

Others do it in reverse to make sure the Conclusion nicely ties the paper together.

We don't have strong views. It's a matter of personal preference and style; both can work. But make sure that:

- The Conclusion clearly shows the way the Purpose of the paper is dealt with, and the key arguments
- There is a clear logical flow between the Conclusion and the recommendations.

Conclusions in an Omnibus paper are difficult

We know there are times when Conclusions need to be slightly longer, for example in an omnibus-type paper, in which separate but related issues are discussed and decisions recommended.

Different tactics are therefore required. Subheadings can indicate the various topics (as you would within a paper).

Or, a table can categorise and tightly summarise a range of issues and their proposed actions.

Conclusions are not Executive summaries

A Conclusion is different from an Executive summary in that it attempts show where the analysis has got to, that it supports the recommendations, and fulfils the purpose of the paper. It's designed for those who have read the paper, or at least are knowledgeable about the topic.

An Executive summary is designed for the busy reader who probably won't read the whole paper: it is a miniature of the paper.

On the other hand, you can think of the Conclusion as like a tight oral statement of the proposal and its rationale as would appear at the end of a discussion on the topic. It is the sort of thing a Minister, or Chair of a committee, might say before seeking the agreement of the meeting to the recommendations.

It can also serve as a useful basis for other Ministers, not deeply involved in the issue, when trying to explain the Cabinet decisions and their rationale to stakeholders.

It is worth testing your Conclusion to see if it fulfils this purpose.

Make the Conclusion a focus of peer review

You can test your Conclusion orally, by imagining that you are wrapping up a discussion on the topic.

Trying your Conclusion out on a colleague who understands the topic and has read the paper is a good way of testing whether it does the job.

Peer review should give significant focus to the Conclusion. An extra hour spent here can make an enormous difference to its impact.

Don't under-estimate the importance of a great conclusion

A great Conclusion can make a real difference to a paper. It's one of those parts of a paper that is worth putting extra effort into. It's your last word on the topic. Make it count.

Policy advice MASTERCLASS



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