



Writing a synopsis

Civil engineering technical report synopsis

You have probably come across examples of synopses, or abstracts, at the beginning of academic journal articles when researching your assignments. If you have read these synopses, you'll already know that a synopsis is a summary of the article; its arguments and conclusion. Consequently, a synopsis is very useful in helping you to decide if an article is relevant to your research, and if it is worth reading. Synopses are also an integral feature of conferences: presenters are required to submit an abstract or synopsis of their papers, which conference delegates later receive. This helps the delegates decide which presentation they will attend.

As a student you may be required to submit a synopsis to accompany a long essay or report. Your synopsis should include an overview of your arguments and conclusions. Synopses are generally only one or two paragraphs long, and they are placed before the beginning of the report or essay.

In industry, a synopsis is generally referred to as an executive summary. The following synopsis, or executive summary, is from a first year civil engineering report on flood mitigation. Students had to consider the following problem:

The spillway on an existing dam has been found to be too small, so that when a very large flood occurs the water level behind the dam will rise up and overtop the dam. When this happens the additional force on the dam wall puts it in risk of collapsing with catastrophic consequences for downstream areas.

Students were asked to investigate the option of raising the dam wall, and of increasing the size of the spillway. Students were also asked to make recommendations.

Student executive summary	Comments
<p>The spillway at an existing dam has been found to be too small and in a major flood the water would overtop the dam and break it. This will have catastrophic consequences on the flood plains downstream. This report examines whether it is better to raise the dam wall or increase the size of the spillway. The impact of these options on areas upstream and downstream are also investigated. Raising the dam wall is more expensive than building an extra spillway; however, the spillway would not be viable during a major flood, and downstream areas would be flooded. Other options were considered to be either not worth the expense or not environmentally friendly. As a result of these studies it has been found that raising the dam wall would be the most viable option environmentally and economically.</p>	<p><i>Orientation to problem</i></p> <p><i>Summary of options</i></p> <p><i>Conclusion</i></p>

Note: This executive summary didn't include any specific recommendations. Another report on flood mitigation listed the recommendations in the executive summary as follows:

The three major points of our recommendation are:

- increase size of spillway
- improve watershed management
- improve downstream management.

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