



The non-technical summary is the window to the outside world with a major function in facilitating public interaction.



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## FASTIPS

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# Non-Technical Summary

Conveying the key information to support decision-making from an environmental impact assessment (EIA) or strategic environmental assessment (SEA) in an understandable and concise manner is not easy. However, that is what the non-technical summary (NTS) should provide, so that everyone, in particular the lay public, can understand and assess a proposed plan or project and its anticipated environmental consequences. It should be a document that is appealing to read and easily understood by the general public and decision-makers.

An NTS (sometimes called the Executive Summary) is obligatory in the great majority of impact assessment systems worldwide. However, this requirement is not always met, or is not adequately met. Reviewing SEA and EIA NTSs over the last decades suggests similar inadequacies: a cut-and-paste approach, few graphics, incoherence in narrative, little indication of how the SEA or EIA contributed to the plan or project, no clear key messages for targeted audiences and often not written in "plain language." Sometimes public complaints were made that NTSs failed to live up their names and were merely publicity brochures for the proponent and regulator.

## HOW CAN WE AVOID THESE IMPERFECTIONS AND COME TO A GOOD NON-TECHNICAL SUMMARY?

NTS should be considered, above all, a communication tool. As such, it is clear that content, structure, language and presentation are essential elements for a high quality NTS. The following tips provide guidance in making a good non-technical summary.

## FURTHER READING

Canter, L. (2008). *Guidance Related to the Summary and Abstract of an EIS*. National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration, National Marine Fisheries Service, Northeast Regional Office, Gloucester (MA). Available at <http://www.greateratlantic.fisheries.noaa.gov/nepa/docs/nmfsneronepaguidancesummaryandabstract.pdf>.

Fry, J., A. Maxweel, S. Apere, P. McAweeney, L. McSharry and A. González (2013). *Non-Technical Summaries - Due Care and Attention?* Paper presented at the 34th IAIA Annual Conference, Viña del Mar, Chile. Available at <http://www.iaia.org/conferences/iaia14/IAIA14-final-papers/Fry,%20John,%20Non-technical%20summaries.pdf>.

Jesus, J. (2009). *Good Practice Criteria for EIA Non-Technical Summaries*. Paper presented at the 29th IAIA Annual Conference, Accra, Ghana. Available at [http://www.iaia.org/iaia09ghana/documents/cs/CS7-3\\_Jesus\\_Good\\_Practice\\_Criteria.pdf](http://www.iaia.org/iaia09ghana/documents/cs/CS7-3_Jesus_Good_Practice_Criteria.pdf).

Murphy, J. (2012). *Effective Non-Technical Summaries for EIA*. IEMA e-Briefing 7, IEMA.

## FIVE IMPORTANT THINGS TO KNOW

1. Due to its large readership and its role in public participation, the NTS is arguably one of the most important parts of an EIA or SEA report.
2. The NTS will be read by diverse audiences, so its preparation should take this into account.
3. The NTS should be a stand-alone document.
4. The writers of an NTS must be creative and have the freedom to re-organize the information of the main report, create new summary tables, insert side bar boxes, and use innovative communication approaches.
5. The NTS will increasingly be web-based, so its content and design should reflect this. Consider the use of hyperlinks, embedded multimedia (video, sounds) and interactive applications.

## FIVE IMPORTANT THINGS TO DO

1. Start early and think about context and audience. Ensure sufficient time and budget to avoid a rush job.
2. Make a new and genuine document. Patchwork does not contribute to an effective NTS. A “cut-and-paste” approach keeps you from using the appropriate structure and language for a summary.
3. Invest in training and assign the preparation of the NTS to a professional copywriter. Only use a member of the EIA or SEA team as a last resort.
4. Use checklists to structure and review the preparation of an NTS (suitable checklists are suggested in the Further Reading box).
5. Review the NTS internally, by the EIA or SEA team, and, also by a third party not involved in the project, plan or program.

## EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE FOR NTS

- The NTS should have a coherent and logical structure.
- Ensure consistency both internally and with the EIA report. Never give information or conclusions not stated in the main EIA or SEA report.
- Dare to be conclusive but avoid impartiality and bias.
- The size of the summary is preferably between 10 and 20 pages.
- Make effective use of graphics and visuals; these help generate understanding of the subject and make the document more appealing.
- Follow the rules for non-technical writing: keep sentences short; avoid jargon, acronyms and abbreviations; use common names if describing species. The style should be simple, clear, concise and non-repetitive.
- Describe how the SEA or EIA contributed to the policy, plan or project.
- Develop clear key messages for the targeted audience.
- Use simple language for classifying impacts, e.g., important or non-important, more or less negative or positive, explain the significance of the impact.
- The NTS must never try to gloss over or minimize the significant effects identified in the EIA or SEA.
- The NTS must complement and support the more detailed EIA or SEA.

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