Capstone Reports & Leave Behinds

Possible opening gambits to engage your audience:
- Question
- Factoid
- Retrospective/Prospective
- Quotation
- Aphorism
- Analogy
- Story

Made to Stick:
- Simple
- Unexpected
- Concrete
- Credible
- Emotional
- Story-based
Capstone Report Strategy Checklist

1. □ Identify and profile your audience

2. □ Determine your objective

3. □ Map the steps from Point A to Point B

   Point A: Where your audience is at the start of the presentation

   Point B: Where your audience should be at the end of the presentation

4. □ Anticipate obstacles

5. □ Identify WIIFY

6. □ Start fast

7. □ Engage the audience from the start
Components of a Formal Report

Prefatory Parts
- Cover
- Title fly
- Title page
- Letter of authorization
- Letter of acceptance
- Letter of transmittal
- Table of contents
- List of illustrations
- Executive summary

Text Parts
- Introduction
- Body
- Summary
- Conclusions
- Recommendations
- Notes

End/Supplementary Parts
- Appendixes
- Bibliography
- Index
Writing a Compelling Executive Summary

How to distill the essence of your world-changing business into something clear, concise, credible, and compelling

By Garage Technology Ventures

By now, you’ve probably already read several articles, blogs—even books—about writing the perfect executive summary. Most of them offer a wealth of well-intended suggestions about all the stuff you need to include in the executive summary. They provide a helpful list of the forty-two critical items you should cover, and then they tell you to be concise. Most guides to writing an executive summary miss the key point: The job of the executive summary is to sell, not to describe.

The executive summary is often your initial face to a potential investor, so it is critically important that you create the right first impression. Contrary to the advice in articles on the topic, you do not need to explain the entire business plan in 250 words. You need to convey its essence, and its energy. You have about 30 seconds to grab an investor's interest. You want to be clear and compelling.

Forget what everyone else has been telling you. Here are the key components that should be part of your executive summary:

1. The Grab

You should lead with the most compelling statement of why you have a really big idea. You need to get your reader to think, “Wow!” This sentence (or two) sets the tone for the rest of the executive summary. Usually, this is a concise statement of the unique solution you have developed to a big problem. It should be direct and specific, not abstract and conceptual. If you can drop some impressive names in the first paragraph you should—world-class advisors, companies you are already working with, a brand name founding investor. Don’t expect an investor to discover that you have two Nobel laureates on your advisory board six paragraphs later. He or she may never get that far.

2. The Problem

You need to make it clear that there is a big, important problem (current or emerging) that you are going to solve, or opportunity you are going to exploit. In this context you are establishing your Value Proposition—there is enormous pain and opportunity out
there, and you are going to increase revenues, reduce costs, increase speed, expand reach, eliminate inefficiency, increase effectiveness, whatever. Don’t confuse your statement of the problem with the size of the opportunity (see below).

3. The Solution

What specifically are you offering to whom? Software, hardware, service, combination? Use commonly used terms to state concretely what you have, or what you do, that solves the problem you’ve identified. Avoid acronyms and don’t try to use these precious few words to create and trademark a bunch of terms that won’t mean anything to most people. You might need to clarify where you fit in the value chain or distribution channels—who do you work with in the ecosystem of your sector, and why will they be eager to work with you. If you have customers and revenues, make it clear. If not, tell the investor when you will.

4. The Opportunity

Spend a few more sentences providing the basic market segmentation, size, growth and dynamics—how many people or companies, how many dollars, how fast the growth, and what is driving the segment. You will be better off targeting a meaningful percentage of a smaller, well-defined, growing market than claiming a microscopic percentage of a huge, heterogeneous, mature market. Don’t claim you are addressing the $24 billion widget market, when you are really addressing the $85 million market for specialized arc-widgets used in the emerging wocket sector.

5. Your Competitive Advantage

No matter what you might think, you have competition. At a minimum, you compete with the current way of doing business. Most likely, there is a near competitor, or a direct competitor that is about to emerge (are you sufficiently paranoid yet??). So, understand what your real, sustainable competitive advantage is, and state it clearly. Do not try to convince investors that your key competitive asset is your “first mover advantage.” Here is where you can articulate your unique benefits and advantages. Believe it or not, in most cases, you should be able to make this point in one or two sentences.

6. The Model

How specifically are you going to generate revenues, and from whom? Why is your model leverageable and scaleable? Why will it be capital efficient? What are the critical metrics on which you will be evaluated—customers, licenses, units, revenues, margin? Whatever it is, what impressive levels will you reach within three to five years?

7. The Team

Why is your team uniquely qualified to win? Don’t tell us you have 48 combined years of expertise in widget development; tell us your CTO was the lead widget developer for...
Intel, and she was on the original IEEE standards committee for arc-widgets. Don’t just regurgitate a shortened form of each founder’s resume; explain why the background of each team member fits. If you can, state the names of brand name companies your team has worked for. Don’t drop a name if it’s an unknown name, and don’t drop a name if you aren’t happy to give the contact as a reference at a later date.

8. The Promise

When you are pitching to investors, your fundamental promise is that you are going to make them a boatload of money. The only way you can do that is if you can achieve a level of success that far exceeds the capital required to do that. Your Summary Financial Projections should clearly show that. But if they are not believable, then all of your work is for naught. You should show five years of revenues, expenses, losses/profits, cash and headcount. You should also show a key driver or two, such as number of customers and units shipped each year.

9. The Ask

This is the amount of funding you are asking for now. This should generally be the minimum amount of equity you need to reach the next major milestone. You can always take more if investors are willing to make more available, but it is hard to take less. If you expect to be raising another round of financing later, make that clear, and state the expected amount.

You should be able to do all this in six to eight paragraphs, possibly a few more if there is a particular point that needs emphasis. You should be able to make each point in just two or three simple, clear, specific sentences.

You might be able to get this on to one page, but most likely this means your executive summary will be about two pages; worst case, maybe three. Some people say it has to be one page. They’re wrong. (The only reason investors ask for one-page summaries is that they are usually so bad the investors just want the suffering to be over sooner.) Most investors find that there is not enough information in one page to understand and evaluate a company they are actually interested in.

Please remember that the outline above should not be applied rigidly or religiously. There is no template that fits all companies, but make sure you touch on each key issue. You need to think through what points above are most important in your particular case, what points are less relevant, what points need emphasis, and what points require no elaboration.

Some other general points:

- Do not lead with broad, sweeping statements about the market opportunity. What matters is not market size, but rather compelling pain. Investors would rather
invest in a company solving a desperate problem for a small growing market, than a company providing an incremental improvement for a large established market.

- Don’t acronym your own name. Sun Microsystems did not build its brand by calling itself “SMI.” (Of course, if you know where the name Sun came from, you understand this is an inside joke.)

- Drop names, if they are real; don’t drop names if they are smoke. If you have a real partnership with a brand name company, don’t hide your lantern under a bushel basket. If you consulted for Cisco’s HR department one week, don’t say you worked for Cisco.

- Avoid “purple farts”—phrases and adjectives that sound impressive but carry no substance. “Next generation” and “dynamic” probably don’t mean anything to your readers (unless you are talking about DRAM) and tend to be irritating. Everyone thinks their company is “disruptive” and their software is “intelligent” and “easy-to-use,” and everyone thinks their financial projections are “conservative.” Explain your company the way you would to a friend at a cocktail party (after one drink, not five).

- State your value proposition and competitive advantage in positive terms, not negative terms. It is what you can do that is important, not what others cannot do. With the one or two most obvious competitors, however, you may need to be very explicit: “Unlike Cisco’s firewall solution, our software can operate...”

- Use simple sentences, not multi-tiered compound sentences.

- Use analogies, as long as you are clarifying rather than hyping. You can say you are using the Google model for generating revenues, as long as you don’t say you expect to be the next Google.

- Don’t lie. You would think this goes without saying, but too many entrepreneurs cross over the line between passionate enthusiasm and fraudulent misrepresentation. On a lighter note, check out “The Top Ten Lies of Entrepreneurs” on the Garage website.

- Go back and reread each sentence when you think you’re done: Is each sentence clear, concise and compelling?

If you are looking for help developing your slide presentation for investors, you can read “Perfecting Your Pitch” on the Garage website.

Finally, one of the most important sentences you write may not even be in the executive summary—it is the sentence that introduces your company in the email that you or a
friend uses to send the executive summary. Your summary might not even get read if this sentence is not well-crafted. Again, it should be specific and compelling. It should sell your company, not just describe it. For more on this topic, you can read “Getting to Wow” on the Garage website.

Venture investors are predisposed to like entrepreneurs. Many of us were entrepreneurs in our prior lives, and all of us enjoy the challenge and excitement of starting up companies. We are on your side. So please help us get to know you better by telling your story clearly and concisely.

Good luck!

If you have any questions about this article, or about Garage Technology Ventures, you can contact Bill Reichert, Managing Director of Garage Technology Ventures (email: reichert@garage.com).

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Developing a Business Case

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What Is a Business Case?
Perhaps you’ve been managing a project and you’ve concluded that acquiring some new software would help your company cut costs and increase efficiencies. Or maybe you want to hire several new employees or buy a new piece of equipment for your group.

You’ve presented your proposal to your boss, and he responded, “You’ll need to make the business case for it before we can consider it.”

You’re happy to oblige—but you’re not sure what, precisely, a business case consists of or how to go about creating one. You wonder, “Does he mean a business plan?” But a business case differs in important ways from a business plan. Your first step in building a case for your great idea is to understand the difference.

**Business case versus business plan**

A *business case* answers the question “What happens if we take this course of action?” For example, if your unit is considering expanding sales to a new market, your boss might ask, “Which of three alternative markets should we invest in to create the most value? And should we even make this investment?”

A *business plan*, on the other hand, describes how an organization or business unit intends to navigate successfully through its own unique competitive environment. Business plans feature long-range projections of revenues, expenses, business strategy, and other information. Typically, managers and executives use
business plans to secure financing from investors or to plan strategy execution for an organization or business.

**When you should create a business case**

In many ways, the process of building a business case is similar to solving a problem. For example, suppose you don’t have enough staff to accomplish your responsibilities, or you believe that your company’s competitors use more efficient processes that allow them to have lower costs than your firm does. Developing a business case would not only help you identify potential solutions to such problems, but also help you sell your ideas to key decision makers.

A business case is useful when you want to

- Demonstrate the value a proposed product or service would generate for your organization
- Prioritize projects within your group and identify which ones to eliminate
- Demonstrate the value of a product or service to a customer to make a sale
- Obtain additional resources for a new project, initiative, or organization
- Modify an existing offering
- Invest in a new capability, such as a software program or training
- Decide whether to outsource a particular function
A complex document

As you might imagine, building a business case for a relatively simple decision—such as whether to buy a new copier for your department and, if so, which one to select—is a pretty straightforward process. When you’re making a case for a more expensive, complex course of action, however, the process requires more thought.

As you’ll discover, this book presents a fairly sophisticated example for illustrative purposes—so you can see how the entire process of creating a business case unfolds. In your role, you may not need to gather as much information as the protagonist in the example must gather, and you may not need to use complex numerical analysis. Whereas a business case similar to the example used in the topic may take ten to fifteen days to complete, a simpler business case may take only a few hours.

*It’s not the plan that is important, it’s the planning.*

—Dr. Graeme Edwards

Seven steps to a business case

Still, it is important to distinguish between the process of building a business case and the *product* you deliver to decision makers and stakeholders. The product is a document or presentation. Many organizations have their own templates and specific guidelines for how to create this product—including how to format the information, how to treat graphics, and so forth.

This book focuses on the *process* of defining the opportunity, identifying the alternatives, gathering the necessary information,
analyzing the alternatives, and preparing to sell your ideas. After all, building a business case is about identifying and considering multiple alternatives before making a well-informed recommendation to support one option that will create value for the organization and often its stakeholders. The creation of a document or presentation is the final step in this process—and it can happen only after you’ve completed the earlier steps.

Regardless of the format of your business case, you can use the following steps to prepare it:

• **Step 1: Define the opportunity.** Describe the situation and the business objectives that your proposal will affect.

• **Step 2: Identify the alternatives.** Brainstorm multiple approaches and then choose three to four to analyze.

• **Step 3: Gather data and estimate time frame.** Obtain information about each alternative and estimate how long each option will take to implement.

• **Step 4: Analyze the alternatives.** Analyze how your options will affect the business objectives you’ve defined.

• **Step 5: Make a choice and assess the risk.** Make a recommendation based on your analyses, and consider how you will mitigate any risks associated with your recommendation.

• **Step 6: Create a plan for implementing your idea.** Identify, at a high level, how you will achieve your goals and who will be accountable for each milestone. Spell out when you expect to see benefits.
• **Step 7: Communicate your case.** Create a document or a presentation, or both, to sell your recommendation to decision makers.

You will need to complete each of these steps to build a strong business case. However, the depth of analysis and extent of documentation necessary to support your case will likely vary depending on the proposed initiative’s scope, costs, organizational impact, and risk.
Step 7: Communicate Your Case
You’ve crafted an implementation plan for your proposed course of action. Now it’s time to take the final step in developing your business case: communicating it to decision makers. Keys to this step include understanding your audience and presenting your business case effectively, including making smart use of visuals.

**Understanding your audience**

Building a business case is hard work. You may feel tempted to explain every detail of all that work to your decision makers while presenting your case to them. Resist that urge. In presenting your case, you want to deliver a short, focused sales pitch, not a lengthy, detailed lecture—even if your written business case contains rich detail.

Who will decide whether to approve your proposed solution? You’ll need to sell your case to the decision makers—and to those who influence them. The following tactics can help you:

- **Clarify what you want them to do.** What do you want from each individual in your audience? Do you want them to approve resources? Do you want them to talk up your proposal to others? Clearly state your need.

- **Identify what they value and care about most.** Do they care about ROI? Customer satisfaction? Some other
measurement of business performance? You identified your stakeholders’ business objectives early in the process of building your business case. Now tailor your pitch to highlight the expected results and metrics that are most important to each decision maker.

- **Articulate what they stand to gain.** Explain how your audience will benefit if your idea is implemented. For example, perhaps the vice president of sales will get his staff up to speed more quickly or exceed sales targets if your recommendation is put into action.

- **Assess their level of risk tolerance.** Demonstrate that you’ve considered the risks inherent in your proposed course of action, and explain your plan for mitigating them.

- **Determine how they like to receive information.** What does your audience or your company require for written business cases in terms of format and level of detail? Do the decision makers want cases summarized in three slides—or in a two-page, single-spaced document? Will they require a copy of your case before meeting with you to hear your presentation? Find out, and then give them what they want.

**Using visuals to present your case**

Check with your finance, strategy, or human resources department to see if your company requires a certain layout for business cases. If it doesn’t specify a desired format, you can use the business case template provided in the Tips and Tools section of this
book. Even if your company only requires a written document for each business case, consider also creating a visual presentation to help sell your idea.

*Put the argument into a concrete shape . . . round and solid as a ball, which they can see and handle and carry home with them, and the cause is half won.*

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

When created effectively, slide presentations help focus your audience’s attention. Because viewing too many slides can be overwhelming to your audience, keep slides to a minimum. Use no more than seven slides to make your case. The slides you’ll want to include correspond approximately to the steps you followed to build your business case:

- **Slide 1:** The opportunity statement
- **Slide 2:** The two or three alternatives you considered, as well as the business objectives and performance metrics you chose to measure your alternatives against
- **Slide 3:** A summary of the costs and benefits you considered
- **Slide 4:** Your initial recommendation and why you chose it
- **Slide 5:** The risks associated with this recommendation and how you plan to mitigate them
- **Slide 6:** The high-level milestones you expect to achieve and dates when the organization will realize benefits; persons
accountable for each milestone; and resources needed for each milestone

• **Slide 7:** A reiteration of why the opportunity is important and how your recommendation will benefit your organization, including its impact on business results

Don’t include formulas and calculations in your slides. Instead, create a few backup slides containing this information, in case someone in your audience asks about them. Listeners tend to lose track of the main idea when the presenter gets too focused on small details. Plan to walk your audience through the presentation and then take time to go more in depth if people have questions.

Be sure to have all your backup information well organized and easily accessible so you are prepared for questions during and after your presentation.

“Tips for writing your business case” provides more ideas for this step.

---

**Tips for writing your business case**

• Ask whether your company has a required format for business cases. If it doesn’t, consider what format would be best for your particular audience—for example, an executive summary highlighting the key points for upper management.

• Remember that this is a sales pitch. Engage your audience by clearly stating the opportunity up front and selling the opportunity again at the end of your document.
• Clearly illustrate how you’ve arrived at your recommendation. Documenting each step you’ve taken will help the reader better understand the reasoning behind your proposal.
• Make it interesting. Remember that someone will have to read your case—your success depends on your ability to tell a convincing story.
• Keep it concise. Your case should be as short as possible while still providing enough detail to give the reader the whole story.
• Use descriptive language (not just a series of bullet points) to help your reader visualize your expected outcomes.
• Demonstrate the value of the project from all points of view—financial, customer, executive, employees, and society as a whole. Tell your reader why this project is important.
• Be clear about what you are asking your audience to do. Do you need resources from them? Do you need their support to get their direct reports to work on your project? Do you need additional headcount, expense dollars, or capital dollars?
• Verify that you have calculated the numbers correctly. Ideally, have the finance department review your calculations and assumptions before you present your case to others.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clear</th>
<th>Excellent (4)</th>
<th>Acceptable (2)</th>
<th>Unacceptable (0)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Composition</strong></td>
<td>The message provides all necessary information, anticipates readers' questions</td>
<td>Message addresses the necessary information.</td>
<td>Readers are left with critical questions regarding the objective of the message.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organization</strong></td>
<td>The message is logically organized at the sentence, paragraph, and message level, making it easy to read and comprehend; includes executive summary where appropriate</td>
<td>Message shows evidence of an organizing principle, but lacks logical flow or sections such as executive summary</td>
<td>The reader struggles to see how the message is organized. The reader may not finish the message.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Facts are clearly distinguished from opinions.</td>
<td>Facts are generally distinguished from opinions.</td>
<td>Facts and opinions are confused and confusing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Wording &amp; Phrasing</strong></td>
<td>The message's terminology engages the target audience.</td>
<td>Message generally speaks to the target audience.</td>
<td>Message does not speak to the target audience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The message uses clear, specific terms that readers can clearly understand. It avoids unnecessary jargon, buzzwords, or big words.</td>
<td>Message uses terminology the readers can understand.</td>
<td>The message uses vague, inflated, or empty terminology.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Format</strong></td>
<td>The message employs an appropriate and effective page layout/format making it easy for readers to see the objective and the structure of the message.</td>
<td>Message uses some principles of effective formatting</td>
<td>Message is not well formatted. The reader may not finish the message.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Headings</strong></td>
<td>Headings clearly show the organization of the message.</td>
<td>Headings are used to show the organization of the message.</td>
<td>Headings either not used or do not help.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Concise</strong></td>
<td>The message is to-the-point, not wordy. It does not waste the readers' time with irrelevant material. Uses active voice &amp; simple language.</td>
<td>The message is generally concise; some wordiness, some long sentences, overly formal style.</td>
<td>The message is wordy and lacks clear focus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Compelling</strong></td>
<td><strong>Tone</strong></td>
<td>Message displays effective expression, uses informal but professional language, presents positive light where possible, &amp; avoids hedging and sarcasm.</td>
<td>Message is generally positive but may display a slightly negative or sarcastic attitude.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Arguments, assertions, and opinions are supported with appropriate resources to convince the readers regarding the validity of the message.</td>
<td>The message is generally supported to build credibility.</td>
<td>The message presumes credibility and does little to earn it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Creatively satisfies all requirements of the assignment or case.</td>
<td>Basically satisfies the requirements of the assignment or case.</td>
<td>Some assignment requirements not addressed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Punctuation &amp; grammar</strong></td>
<td>Correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation are used throughout the message to assure readers that the message is credible and professional.</td>
<td>Generally correct for grammar, spelling, and punctuation. A few minor errors that do not impede meaning or credibility for the reader.</td>
<td>The many errors in this message make the reader doubt the message's credibility and the writer's professionalism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Documentation</strong></td>
<td>The message effectively uses appropriate APA citation format to build credibility.</td>
<td>The message uses adequate APA citation format.</td>
<td>Inadequately documented. Possible plagiarism. APA format not used.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Every department has long and dense, but necessary, documentation in the form of memos, reports, manuals, and briefs. These artifacts are useful for holding a lot of information in a single container.

Every department also has presentations it uses when people need to combine the power of the spoken word and compelling images to persuade an audience.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of a Document</th>
<th>Characteristics of a Presentation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exhaustive</td>
<td>Cinematic story</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topical structure</td>
<td>Dramatic structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informative</td>
<td>Transformative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analytical process</td>
<td>Creative process</td>
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<tr>
<td>Visually dense</td>
<td>Visually sparse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intended to be read</td>
<td>Intended to be heard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-guided</td>
<td>Presenter-guided</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
NEITHER DENSE DOCUMENTS NOR SPARSE SLIDES CONTAIN THE RIGHT BALANCE OF DETAIL AND SCANABILITY TO BE USED AS A PRE-READ OR HANDOUT. SLIDEDOCs COMBINE THE STRENGTHS OF DOCUMENTS AND PRESENTATIONS WHILE MINIMIZING THEIR WEAKNESSES.

**Characteristics of a Slidedoc**

- Explanatory
- Modular structure
- Educational
- Visual thinking process
- Tight visual-to-prose ratio
- Understood quickly