Word on the street: Tips for writing a public summary

Public summaries can be a powerful tool to extend and broaden the impact of research. With practice and experience, writing a public summary can become effortless. A public summary uses plain, everyday language to explain complex research in a way that can better connect authors with the general public.

UNDERSTAND THE AUDIENCE

- Have you identified your main audience? (I.e. general public, patients, policymakers, etc.).
- Try to "talk" to your audience.
- What is their level of knowledge of the topic?
- Check your reading level. Make sure it's appropriate.

USE CLEAR, SIMPLE WORDS

- Use common, everyday words.
- Eliminate jargon like medical or scientific terms, unless absolutely necessary for explanation.
- Keep content meaningful and user-focused.
- Use active voice and conversational tone.

IDENTIFY KEY POINTS

- Summarize the important key aspects in a way that is easy for the audience to understand.
- Summarize the main findings/conclusions
- Make sure you answer the "why" and "so what" rather than "how."
- Emphasize the benefits of your work to resonate with your audience.

WHAT IS THE STRUCTURE?

- Write a title that is short and includes keywords and searchable terms.
- Focus on the most significant findings without overwhelming the reader with details.
- Limit sentence and page length.
- Follow a logical order. This may not always coincide with chronological order.

USE FORMATTING

- Check the format required (length, structure, etc.).
- Audiences are scanning, not reading. Use visuals like illustrations, tables, or graphs, to easily present data to create eye flow.
- Use formatting techniques like bullet points and subheadings to enhance readability.
- Write a catchy headline or introduction.

OTHER POINTERS

- Eliminate promotional, redundant, outdated, and trivial content.
- Proofread for clarity, coherence and accuracy.
- If posted on a website, use headers or menus. Consider breaking up long text across several pages.
- Eliminate filler. Too much text leads to skipping.
- Use spellcheck.

RESOURCES FOR WRITING A PUBLIC SUMMARY

TRAININGS
DoD Plain Language Training
NHS Lay Summary Training & Guide
NIH Self-Guided Training
PlainLanguage.gov Trainings

HOW TO WRITE A LAY A SUMMARY
Census.gov Plain Language
CMS Guidelines for Effective Writing
Elsevier Resource
Recommended Characteristics Review
Wiley Resource

LITERACY TOOLS
CDC Everyday Words
Flesch-Kincaid Readability Tool
PlainLanguage.gov Resources