

Writing a lay summary



CCLG Research Advisory Group
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“The first thing I read in an application is the summary. It really sets the tone and helps orient the reader, making it much easier to navigate the text. The process of trying to distil the essence of complex research without dumbing it down is difficult but important – both for reviewers as well as for a public increasingly engaging with our research.”

Professor Paul Little, Programme Director, NIHR Programme Grants for Applied Research

Writing a clear, readable lay summary has become increasingly important: it is now part of grant and ethics applications. Increasingly lay members serve on scientific review boards and NHS ethics committees, where they have full voting rights when making decisions. In addition, widespread dissemination on the web, to the general public, means that a lay summary must be readable by non-specialists as well as by experts in a field: there is the need to balance detailed scientific explanation without over-simplifying the content.

We include here a checklist for you to follow when writing your lay abstract. We have also included a list of things to avoid, what not to do, to ensure your lay summary is fit for purpose. We refer to some resources you might find helpful.

A lay summary for a CCLG grant application must be no more than 300 words.

Checklist when writing a lay summary:

- Check the funding guidance and word/character limits.
- Define the purpose of your lay summary at the outset.
- Be clear on your audience; check the membership of the panel you are submitting to.
- Write a headline and brief synopsis first and expand this to include more detail, to provide an overview of your entire research study: answer the questions, WHAT, WHERE, WHEN WHY and HOW.
- Think about the order of the information and structure; take the reader with you through your study.
- Break up text if you can, use of bullet lists is recommended.
- Use an active voice rather than passive voice throughout, for example say ‘we will do it’, rather than ‘it will be done by us’.
- Make sure the take home message is crystal clear.
- Read it aloud and make adjustments.
- You can check the readability and reading level of your summary using a tried and tested formula called Flesch Reading Ease (see resources).
- Better still ask lay members, or patient and public members of your research team, as well as members of your scientific community, to review your lay summary and provide feedback.

What not to do:

1. DO NOT copy your scientific abstract and use as your lay summary.
2. DO NOT use long and complicated words.

3. DO NOT use long sentences.
4. DO NOT use abbreviations.
5. DO NOT use jargon.
6. DO NOT use technical terms.
7. DO NOT leave this till the last minute.
8. DO NOT forget to leave enough time for your peers, and patient and public members of your research team to read your lay summary.
9. DO NOT treat it as an afterthought and non-essential to your success.

Resources

Duke, M. (2012). 'How to Write a Lay Summary'. DCC How-to Guides. Edinburgh: Digital Curation Centre. Available online: <http://www.dcc.ac.uk/resources/how-guides>

Flesch Reading Ease. <http://www.readabilityformulas.com/flesch-reading-ease-readability-formula.php>

Flesch Reading Ease Calculator. <http://www.readabilityformulas.com/free-readability-formula-tests.php>

National Institute for Health Research. Make it Clear <http://www.invo.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/MICleaflet.pdf>

Plain English Campaign <http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/free-guides.html>