

Writing a good lay summary

This guide will take you through some of the key points to remember when writing a lay summary. This is general advice – please always check with your individual funding body for any guidelines they supply.

Think about your audience

Remember that people who read your summary will be an interested audience, but are not specialists. Therefore, you should pitch your summary at the same level as an article in a tabloid-style newspaper. Always ask a non-specialist to read through your summary to make sure it can be clearly understood.

- Avoid jargon and technical terms, wherever possible – if you have to use them provide a clear explanation.
- Avoid complicated English or uncommon words.
- Use active rather than passive phrases. For example, say ‘we will look at how cells change’ rather than ‘how cells change will be looked at’.
- Keep sentences short and avoid complicated sentence structure (e.g. lots of semicolons)
- Break your text up into sections and avoid really long paragraphs.

If your lay summary is for an application to a charity, keep in mind that many of those reading the summary may have loved ones with the disease you are researching, or have the disease themselves. Think about your language. For instance, refer to people in your study as ‘volunteers’ rather than ‘subjects.’

You don’t need to use the formal language you use in report writing. Here are some substitutions you could use to keep things clear:

efficacy of X – how well X works
probability – how likely X is to happen
participate in – take part
prior to – before
discontinue – stop
in the event of – if
inform – tell
scheduled to undergo – due to have
accordingly, consequently – so
utilisation – using
with reference to, with regard to – about
if this is the case – if so

Content

Make sure you get your key messages across by keeping your summary as clear and concise as possible. Avoid getting bogged down in detail. Your audience will care about what you hope to achieve and why your research is important, not which particular type of microscope you’re using!

1) Back to basics

It's worth starting your lay summary with a brief explanation of your research area. For example, what is diabetes, how many people are living with it? Don't assume any medical or scientific knowledge.

2) What will you achieve and why is it important?

State clearly what you are trying to achieve and why it is relevant to your audience. Could your work help us understand why people develop a certain condition? Will your project unpick a mechanism that could help in drug discovery?

3) How will you do the research?

State how you will carry out the research (is it in cells, animals or people), so that the reader has some context of the application of your work.

4) What's the bigger picture?

Discuss why your work is necessary and how it takes your funding body closer to their goal (e.g. finding a treatment for blood cancer).

If you would like help with your lay summary, please email Emma O'Brien (emma.obrien@rdm.ox.ac.uk), Public Engagement and Communications Officer for the Radcliffe Department of Medicine or Bryony Graham (bryony.graham@rdm.ox.ac.uk), Public Engagement and Communications Officer for the WIMM.