




# How to Write a Plain Language Summary

These proposed steps were developed by combining recommendations from the literature on developing **plain language summaries** with insights from a group of 11 patient/public partners. The result is an evidence-based, patient/public partner informed set of steps for creating a plain language summary.

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## Steps to Writing a Plain Language Summary:

Steps	General Principles	Key Activities
 <p><b>1</b> Preparation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ideally, involve at least two patient/public partners.</li><li>• Researchers should discuss any desired plain language writing skills with the patient/public partners and plan support for skill development.</li><li>• Foster a safe, comfortable partnership for all team members.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Determine the writing team.</li><li>• Identify your target audience.</li><li>• Identify the objective and key messages of the plain language summary.</li><li>• Plan your required resources (i.e., budget, personnel).</li><li>• Provide a sample template for patient/public partners to visualize the summary when drafting.</li><li>• Decide on dissemination and authorship.</li></ul>
 <p><b>2</b> Writing</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Follow the plan outline in Step 1, while allowing for accommodations as needed.</li><li>• Ask the patient/public partners to identify the most important information to communicate from the study.</li><li>• Use guiding questions such as “What did you do?”, “What did you find?”, and “Why does it matter?”</li><li>• Provide a sample template for patient/public partners to aid in drafting the summary.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Confirm the content format.</li><li>• Decide who will draft the summary.</li><li>• Draft the summary.</li></ul>

## Steps

## General Principles

## Key Activities



- Ensure feedback from non-specialist audiences.
- Anticipate multiple rounds of writing and reviewing.

- Allow all patient/public partners an opportunity to review the draft summary.
- Obtain feedback from 3-5 sample target audience members who are not familiar with the subject matter.



- Additional rounds of user testing may be needed.
- Prioritize accessibility in design (e.g., screen reader friendliness, alt text).
- Prioritize audience comprehension by user-testing with a non-specialist audience. Do not rely on readability testing.

- Conduct a final review to ensure accuracy.
- Finalize the content with the entire writing team; use a production team if available.



- Tailor dissemination to the intended audience.
- Consider a dedicated dissemination team for planning and accessibility (e.g., social media campaign).

- Disseminate per your target audience.



- Collect metrics to support evaluation (e.g., # of downloads, website accesses).
- Involve experienced patient/public partners and researchers as future mentors.

- Evaluate the writing process:
  - Did the process work well?
  - Could it be improved?
  - What did team members learn from their experience?

## Qualities of a Plain Language Summary:

Here are some characteristics that both patient/public partners and the literature say are important:

No jargon ✓

Using active voice ✓

Objective reporting ✓

No long or complex sentences ✓

Defining all terms ✓

Using informative visuals ✓

## Content Characteristics

More than **50%** of the resources in the literature suggest to include the following:



*How:* **Methods**  
51% (n=27)



*Why:* **Importance of Study**  
57% (n = 30)



*What:* **Study Findings**  
79% (n = 42)

## Word Count

Studies lacked consistency regarding the ideal length of a plain language summary, but **83%** of the sources recommended a range of 150-500 words.

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