



# 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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**Full article citation:** Zarshenas S, Mosel J, Chui A, Seaton S, Singh H, Moroz S, Khan T, Logan S, Colquhoun H. Recommended characteristics and processes for writing lay summaries of healthcare evidence: a co-created scoping review and consultation exercise. Res Involv Engagem 9, 121 (2023).

# **Steps to Writing a Plain Language Summary:**

#### Steps

### **General Principles**

### **Key Activities**



- Ideally, involve at least two patient/public partners.
- Researchers should discuss any desired plain language writing skills with the patient/public partners and plan support for skill development.
- Foster a safe, comfortable partnership for all team members.

- Determine the writing team.
- Identify your target audience.
- Identify the objective and key messages of the plain language summary.
- Plan your required resources (i.e., budget, personnel).
- Provide a sample template for patient/public partners to visualize the summary when drafting.
- Decide on dissemination and authorship.



- Follow the plan outline in Step 1, while allowing for accommodations as needed.
- Ask the patient/public partners to identify the most important information to communicate from the study.
- Use guiding questions such as "What did you do?", "What did you find?", and "Why does it matter?"
- Provide a sample template for patient/public partners to aid in drafting the summary.

- Confirm the content format.
- Decide who will draft the summary.
- Draft the summary.

### **Steps**

## **General Principles**

## **Key Activities**

- Seviewing Seviewing
- 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?

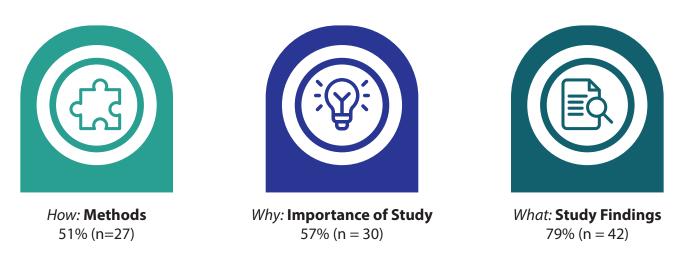
# **Qualities of a Plain Language Summary:**

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



#### **Content Characteristics**

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



#### **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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