





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.

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
 <p>1 Preparation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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.
 <p>2 Writing</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confirm the content format. • Decide who will draft the summary. • Draft the summary.

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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