Plain Language Checklist for Lay Brief Summaries

Study managers can use this checklist to write a "brief summary description" that follows the main evidence-based plain language best practices for writing lay research summaries. The goal is a brief description that the general public can easily understand and engage with.

Focus

Know your intended audience and make the purpose of your research clear to your readers:

☐ Think about your audience. Keep them in mind as you write the summary: their age, gender, ethnicity, health conditions, reading level, and cultural beliefs. What background knowledge do they have and what questions might they have?

☐ Explain the purpose or "why" of the research, including possible benefits.

☐ Identify the information that is most relevant and include only that "need to know" information. "Need to know" information includes "who" can take part and "how" the research will happen. Omit "nice to know" information, such as previous research or background information.

Content

Make your words easier to understand by saying what you mean and nothing more:

☐ Replace complex terms with common, everyday words. For example:
  o Effective = works well
  o Utilize = use

☐ Define essential jargon using common words. For example, "a placebo is a look-alike substance that contains no active drug".

☐ Write out the full name for acronyms on first use.

☐ Write sentences in active voice, in which the subject performs the action: "The researcher read the chart" instead of "The chart was read".

☐ Use consistent terms rather than varying them. If you choose "researchers" stick with it throughout the summary, instead of using both "researchers" and "investigators".

☐ Keep sentences and paragraphs short. Aim for sentences of 15 words or less, and paragraphs of 3-5 sentences or less.

☐ Aim for a 6th-8th grade reading level.

Numbers

Make numbers easier to understand by including only essential numbers and giving them meaning:

- [ ] Include only essential numbers that are highly related to the purpose or that will help readers take action. Eliminate background information, such as prevalence data.

- [ ] If you must include numbers, frame numbers by giving them context. Give numbers meaning by using words such as "high" or "low" and "better" or "worse".

- [ ] Use words and numbers to give a complete understanding. For example, pair "about half" with "17 out of 40".

- [ ] Give both percentages and use natural frequencies: 7 out of 10 participants (70%).

- [ ] Avoid qualitative terms such as "reduce" or "increase". Try "lower" or "raise".

Structure

Structure your summary so readers can easily find what they need:

- [ ] Place the content in this order:
    1. Most important information – the core message or what patients **need** to know to take action
    2. Supporting information
    3. Background information, if required to understand the research – history or data. Remove background information if not required.

- [ ] Stick to 1 main message supported by 3 to 5 points that tie directly to the purpose.

- [ ] Delete extra words that muddy sentences, such as "In order to…".

- [ ] Use bullets for lists of items. Limit bulleted lists to 2-7 items.

Test the summary

The gold standard is to test the summary with people from your intended audience to ensure it is easy to understand.

Or, ask a peer in another field, a family member, or a friend to read and share feedback. This can help identify jargon and content that may be misinterpreted.

Resources

- Health Literacy Online at https://health.gov/healthliteracyonline/
- CDC Health Literacy Resources at https://www.cdc.gov/healthliteracy/learn/resources.html
- Plain Language Action and Information Network at https://www.plainlanguage.gov/
- CDC's Everyday Words for Public Health Communication at https://www.cdc.gov/other/pdf/everydaywordsforpublichealthcommunication.pdf
- Health Research for Action's Plain Language Word List https://multco.us/file/46697/download