

Plain English Summaries

April 2021

Who is this guidance for?

This guidance is for researchers writing plain English summaries, and board and panel members including public reviewers.

What is a Plain English Summary?

A plain English summary is a clear, brief summary of the research that has been written for members of the public, rather than researchers or professionals. It should be written clearly and simply, without jargon and with an explanation of any technical terms.

Why is it important?

A good quality plain English summary provides an easy to read overview of your whole study and will help:

- those carrying out the review (reviewers and board and panel members) to have a better understanding of your research proposal
- the research funders to publicise the research that they fund
- members of the public, health professionals, policy makers and the media to understand the research

Many reviewers use this summary to inform their review of your funding application. They include clinicians and researchers who do not have specialist knowledge of your field as well as public reviewers. If your application for funding is successful, the summary will be used on the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) and other websites. Therefore, the summary needs to be used on its own to describe the research, without the rest of the application.

Writing a good summary right now will save you time later, as you might want to use it in the future, for example on patient information sheets. Use this summary as a foundation to build on and adapt as your research develops.

NIHR 'make it clear' - Plain English summaries in NIHR funded research

NIHR is committed to making sure that each research study it funds has a clear and concise plain English summary. It is important that this information explains the research as a whole and is easy to read and understand. A good quality plain English summary, submitted as part of the standard application form, is a requirement of NIHR funding.

If you are applying for NIHR funding, then many reviewers use this summary to inform their review of your funding application. They include clinicians and researchers who do not have specialist knowledge of your field as well as public reviewers. If your application for funding is successful, the summary will be used on NIHR and other websites.

The summary will be assessed by NIHR reviewers and board and panel members who will comment on the summary as part of the review process. If it is not considered to be of a good quality then the researchers will be advised through the current feedback processes, and may be required to amend the summary prior to final funding approval.

Individual NIHR Programmes will have different requirements for word length – some will be 300 words and others may be up to 750 words. The information will be available in their guidance for applicants.

NIHR strongly advises applicants to involve patients, carers and/or members of the public in developing a plain English summary.

“If the plain English summary is well written, somehow the whole application seems easier to assess – I have an idea of what it is about.” Public reviewer

How to write a summary

Audience

First of all, think about your audience. The people who read your summary will be an interested audience, but are not specialists. A [2011 government survey](#) of adult literacy skills found that approximately 15% of UK adults have a literacy level at or below that to be expected of 11 year olds. You can use online tools to check the 'readability' of your summary, to assess your language reading age. Find out more in the Resources section below.

Simple rules

There are a few simple rules for writing in plain English. In summary these are:

- avoid wherever possible using jargon, abbreviations and technical terms – if you have to use them provide a clear explanation
- avoid complicated English or uncommon words
- use active not passive phrases, for example say 'we will do it' rather than 'it will be done by us'
- keep sentences short
- plan out the order and structure of the summary
- break up the text, for example use bullet lists or headings
- ask patients / carers / colleagues to read a draft to find out if anything is unclear

It is often good to return to your first draft after a few hours. With fresh eyes you are likely to spot opportunities for improvement - such as words that can be removed - that you missed the first time. For example:

The draft community engagement proposal ~~that was received~~ from the local hospital

We are ~~currently in the process of~~ preparing a public involvement strategy to be launched in May 2014

The plain English summary is not the same as a scientific abstract – please do not cut and paste this or other sections of your application form to create the plain English summary. The [NIHR Glossary](#) has definitions of research terms developed with a panel of researchers and members of the public.

Remember that if your NIHR application for funding is successful, the summary will be used on NIHR and other websites. Therefore, the summary needs to be used on its own to describe the research, without the rest of the application.

What to include?

When writing the plain English summary consider including the following information where appropriate (these sub-headings are for guidance only):

Aim(s) of the research

- what are you aiming to find out?
- how will patients / carers / members of the public and services benefit from your research – either directly or in the longer term?

Background to the research

- why does this research need to be done now?
- what is the scale of the issue? For example:
 - how many patients / members of the public are affected?
 - what are the costs to services?

Design and methods used

- what design and methods have you chosen and why?
- who are your participants? (if appropriate)

Patient and public involvement

- how have patients / the public been involved in developing this research to date?
- how will patients / the public be involved in the conduct / management of the research?

Dissemination

- how will the findings be communicated and to whom?

Guidance for reviewers and board and panel members

The plain English summary is intended for an interested audience, who are not necessarily specialists. The summary should be written at roughly the same level as an article in a newspaper. With this in mind, please comment on the following:

- does the plain English summary give a clear explanation of the research?
 - does it help you carry out your review? If not, why not?
 - is the language used appropriate and clear? If not, where are there problems?
 - are scientific terms, abbreviations and jargon explained? If not, which terms need explanation?
- Could this plain English summary be used on its own to describe the proposed research? If not, what further information is needed?

Resources

Several organisations and groups have developed guidance to support the writing of plain English summaries.

[Plain English Campaign](#) produces a series of guides that can be downloaded free of charge including: How to write in plain English; How to write medical information in plain English.

[‘How to Write a Lay Summary’](#). Duke, M. (2012).DCC How-to Guides. Edinburgh: Digital Curation Centre. This publication has information, guidelines and resources for writing lay summaries.

[Peninsula Cerebra Research Unit for Childhood Disability Research \(PenCRU\)](#) write their plain language summaries with parents of disabled children from their Family Faculty. Plain language

summaries for each project are written in partnership with this group of parents, who are involved in deciding the headline, content and style of the document.

Readability tools:

- [Hemingway Editor App](#)
- [The Writer readability checker](#)

Contact your local [NIHR Research Design Service](#) for further advice and support

For further information from NIHR, contact ced@nihr.ac.uk

Acknowledgements

This resource was reviewed by NIHR in March 2021 for accuracy and currency. The NIHR endorses this resource. It draws on previous content from the INVOLVE website on [‘Plain English Summaries’](#) and the [‘make it clear’ campaign](#).