

How (and Why!) to Write a Great Lay Summary

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Millions of scientific articles are published every year and important scientific breakthroughs are happening daily. Scientific research is one of the most important foundations of modern life, yet it can be difficult for the average person especially when it comes to following new developments in science. This is because most scientific articles are full of jargons and often difficult for a lay person to understand. As a scientist, it is important to attract the attention of funders and journalists and make the knowledge of your discoveries available to everyone. The easiest way to do this is by writing a lay summary for your research articles. In this article, we will look at how to write a clear and compelling lay summary so you can make sure your research reaches the widest audience possible.

What is a Lay Summary, and Where can I Find One?

A lay summary is similar to an abstract, but it is written in simple language that anyone can understand. In an effort to make science more accessible to the public, many journals now publish lay summaries on their landing pages. For example, Elsevier journals such as [Epilepsy and Behavior Case Reports](#) and [Journal of Hepatology](#) publish lay summaries. The European Union Clinical Trials Regulation [also includes a requirement](#) for lay summaries. The purpose of a lay summary is to help readers who are not experts in a field understand complex information. In addition to general members of the public, lay summaries may be read by journalists and research funders. As a researcher, publicity and funding are both important to the success of your career, and to furthering opportunities for your research. The simple act of writing a lay summary can increase your chances of receiving both.

It can be difficult for experts to write a good lay summary. Many researchers don't know where to start or what information to include. What should be in your lay summary, and how can you make sure the language is simple enough for anyone to understand?

What Information Belongs in a Lay Summary?

A lay summary should be about a paragraph in length and summarize the main points of the research in your article. An effective way to make sure your lay summary includes all of the information necessary is to [focus on answering six main questions](#): who, what, how, where, when, and why. Another approach you can take is to [outline the question, need, approach, conclusion, and benefits](#). In other words, you want to state what question you are trying to answer, why it's important, how you tried to find the answer, what your results were, and who this research benefits. If your summary includes all of this information, you are off to a good start. However, don't just randomly answer all of these points – make sure that your lay summary flows smoothly and in a logical order.

Simplifying Your Language

Another key component to writing an effective lay summary is to use simple, everyday language. The style of academic writing is different from everyday language. When we learn to write academic papers, we become used to removing people and actors from our sentences to make them seem more objective. However, a good lay summary does the opposite of this. For example:

Academic style: There is significant uncertainty in the literature surrounding this topic.

Lay style: We still don't know a lot about this topic.

Academic style: Data was analyzed using SPSS and multilevel regression analysis.

Lay style: I analyzed data using quantitative methods.

A good guide to making sure you are not writing in an overly academic style is to check that all of your sentences are [in active voice rather than passive voice](#). Academic writing also uses lots of jargon, as we mentioned before. But to write a good lay summary, you need to [remove as much jargon as possible](#), and explain any that you feel is critical to leave in. For example, scientists know that “protein” is a polymeric macromolecule. But if you ask someone on the street, they will tell you it is a nutrient found in meat and nuts. There are [numerous guides available offering suggestions](#) for how to [simplify complex scientific language](#).

Mistakes to Avoid

Avoid the temptation to write eye-catching headlines that are overly broad. You want to make your research accessible, but you aren’t a tabloid journalist. [Avoid big, general statements](#) such as “climate change is a danger that threatens us all” or “knee pain is a devastating health problem affecting millions.” Instead, focus on the more limited and specific problem at hand. Instead of “climate change is a danger that threatens us all” you could write “recent studies on the impacts of climate change in Australia have found that...” Instead of “knee pain is a devastating health problem affecting millions,” you could try “knee pain is a result of injury to the knee joint and affects one in four people in the US.”

A great way to test if your lay summary is truly appropriate for a non-expert audience is to ask someone else to read it. Ask your friends or family to read it and give you feedback. You can also [try explaining your research to someone](#) who is not in your field. The questions they ask will help you identify more easily what you need to clarify and what terminology they don’t know.

Overall, writing lay summaries is a great way to make your research easily accessible to funders, journalists, and members of the public. Lay summaries help to break down the barrier between academics and non-academics, and showcase the value of your work. Writing a great lay summary may be just the thing that gets you that next research grant.

Do you have any other tips for writing good lay summaries? Let us know in the comments below.

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