

Dummies' Guide to Writing a Lay Summary

1. **Content.** Make sure that you answer the questions: Who, What, Where, When, Why, How?
2. **Brevity.** Use short sentences – up to 15 words on average. Try to include only one idea per sentence. Avoid sub clauses where possible.
3. **Structure.** Use paragraphs. Break up your text with sub-headings and bullet points to make it easier to take in.
4. **Jargon.** Use everyday language where possible, and give simple explanations of scientific terms. For example, use 'nerves' instead of 'neurons', or 'cell death' instead of 'apoptosis'.
5. **'Academic' language.** Academics often use complex language where there are simpler alternatives. Use simple words and cut out unnecessary words. Some examples:

Participate in – take part

Discontinue – stop

Duration – time

Scheduled to undergo – due to have

With reference to, with regard to – about

For the purpose of - to

Prior to – before

In the event of – if

Inform – tell

Accordingly, consequently – so

If this is the case – if so

6. **Use the active voice, not passive.** For example: 'You will have chemotherapy', rather than 'Chemotherapy will be given to you'.
7. **Imagine you're talking to the reader.** How would you explain it to the person next door?
8. **Get a non-scientist to read it** and comment.
9. **Make it human.** For example: 'people with breast cancer' rather than 'breast cancer sufferers' or 'people with a disability' rather than 'the disabled'.
10. **Context.** Include some background; are you trying to find out more about a condition, or testing new treatments, for example.
11. **Explain the study's impact.** Make sure you explain the desired end goal clearly, even if it's some time in the future
12. **Check spelling and grammar** closely – any mistakes will undermine your message.
13. **Readability.** Are you excluding people by making your readability level too high? These two websites will calculate it for you (in slightly different ways). The second website will provide suggestions for simplifying your writing:

a. <http://www.thewriter.com/what-we-think/readability-checker/>

b. http://www.online-utility.org/english/readability_test_and_improve.jsp

Readability is an imprecise science. Decide on the audience you're aiming for and their approximate reading age. This should help you simplify your writing. N.B. Approximately 15% of UK adults has a literacy level at or below that to be expected of 11 year olds. The Guardian has a reading age of 14 (on average) and The Sun one of 9.