
GUIDELINES FOR CREATING A
PUBLIC SUMMARY

**Meharry-Vanderbilt Community Engaged
Research Core**

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BACKGROUND

Researchers and clinicians have an important role to play in disseminating research findings to diverse audiences and stakeholders. Getting in the habit of writing a lay abstract, or “public summary”, that describes your study findings and accompanies all scientific manuscripts and presentations, is a vital part in sharing your research results with the public. Think about this as creating an elevator speech about your research results that could be easily communicated to someone who doesn’t have background information or your training. In the future, we hope this will also be a standard practice for all biomedical researchers.

Use the guidelines below and the complementary template to write a summary of your research study and results.

PUBLIC SUMMARY GUIDELINES

Reading Level

Aim to write the summary at a 6th grade reading level. Keep in mind that including certain scientific terms may be unavoidable and will raise the reading level. In these cases, be sure to define these terms in plain language and/or use a simplified figure or picture to illustrate your point.

Ways to lower reading level:

- Use short sentences (15 words or under) to improve the readability of the abstract.
- Whenever possible, use words that are no longer than two syllables.

Tip! Use tools in Microsoft Word to quickly and easily check readability statistics.

Understandability

The public summary should be clear and understandable to a diverse audience of varying levels of educational attainment and understanding of scientific findings.

- Avoid using medical or research jargon. (Example: use "high blood pressure" instead of "hypertension")
 - Communicate real-world application of the results – describe what the results mean in a larger context (for the population, for science, etc.).
 - Use simple figures and pictures to enhance understanding.
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Include Research Participants

Ask your research participants to review your public summary and offer feedback on ways to improve it.

Tip! Plan to integrate this step into your research protocol and prioritize doing this after data are collected.

Make Use of Readability Resources

For additional tips about improving readability and clarity of documents, please refer to the following:

- [CDC Plain Language Materials & Resources](#)
 - [MRCT Center Health Literacy in Clinical Research website](#)
 - [PRISM Readability Toolkit](#)
 - [MHP Salud Reading Assessment Tool](#)
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CRITICAL ELEMENTS - PUBLIC SUMMARY

(limit to 2-3 sentences for each element, when possible):

Element 1: What is the important question you were answering? (*Background*)

- Why is this important? What is the historical context? What problem does this research address?
- Who is the target audience?

Element 2: What did you do? (*Methods*)

- What happened?
- Who was involved?

Element 3: What were the findings? (*Results*)

- How do the findings relate to public health?

Element 4: What does this mean? (*Discussion/Implications*)

- How will these findings change things?
- What are the next steps?

Element 5: Acknowledgement of research participants and community involvement

- Thank participants in the study
- Highlight community partnerships and/or extent of community engagement in the study (e.g. community engagement studios, focus groups, community advisory board review)
- Include additional public dissemination activities

Element 6: Include link to published results