Guidelines for Writing a Lay Summary

The ability to convey the details and significance of research to non-experts, to translate it for the average person, is not an easy task… but what is the point of research if nobody understands it?

Canadian Frailty Network's Citizen Engagement Committee has created a set of guidelines to help communicate research to a broader, general audience. The guidelines include some general rules and tips for writing a "lay" summary, as well as links to readability tools, and a "before and after" example.

What is a lay summary?

A lay summary is an overview of a research project described in a way that can be easily understood by those without prior experience of the subject. It is not a slight modification of the abstract or a simplification of the research; a well-written lay summary allows the public to understand research and its value, impact, and applications. Lay summaries also help reviewers evaluate research grant applications, and facilitate use of research results by government, the public and private sectors, and the community at large.

How are lay summaries used?

Lay summaries are used to:

- communicate the nature and importance of research to the general public,
- inform citizen members on committees, research teams, and projects,
- help adjudicators score grant applications, and
- encourage multidisciplinary work by helping those in unrelated disciplines fully understand each other's research.

How to write a lay summary

Using plain language, clearly describe in simple language:

- what question the researchers are asking,
- why they are asking the question,
- what they will do to find the answer,
- what do they expect to find out,
- why the anticipated findings matter, and
- how they plan to use the findings.

The summary should be as brief as possible, which is about the same length as an abstract, or in compliance with the requirements outlined by the grant application. The lay summary should also aim to be written at a grade 8 level or lower.

1. **Title**
   - Short and simple
2. **What is the research question?**
3. **Why are the researchers proposing this study?**
   - Describe how the study addresses the relevant evidence gap
   - How many older adults living with frailty would be affected by this research?
   - Why is the study needed? Highlight the direction of the research
4. **How are they proposing to do it?**
   - Describe the study methods, the study setting, and the study population
5. **How long will it take?**
6. **What are the expected outcomes?**
7. **How would it make a difference in the lives of the population being studied?**
   - The potential applications of the research
   - The relevance and benefits of the research to the wider population, to the quality of life, health and care of the older adults living with frailty, and to the body of knowledge about frailty
   - Suggestions on how these findings could impact older adults living with frailty and/or their family caregivers and how this might be measured
8. **One- or two-sentence summary of the project**

Tips:

- Define any technical terms used
- Refrain from using jargon
- Refrain from using acronyms, but if necessary, spell out in full when first mentioned in the text
- Have someone from outside the field of study read the summary
- Read the summary aloud to catch errors or awkward expressions
- Provide simple, relevant examples when describing the research
- Use people-first language by focusing on the person, not the disability; for example, say "people who are blind" rather than "the blind", or "older adults living with frailty" rather than "frail older adults"

Readability tests

Use the online tools below to generate a readability score for your text.
- Read-able: http://read-able.com
- Text Readability Consensus Calculator: http://www.readabilityformulas.com/free-readability-formula-tests.php
- Readable.io: https://readability-score.com/text/

Writing a lay summary for research results

Up until this point in the document, the guidelines have been written for a lay summary used for an application or proposal, i.e. *before* the research has been conducted, or when the research is underway. A lay summary is sometimes used after the research has been completed as well. At this stage, it should still be

written clearly using plain language; however, the questions answered by the summary may slightly differ. Here are some examples of questions that should be addressed:

- what was the question asked by the researchers,
- what did they do to find the answer,
- what did they find out,
- what do the results mean, and
- what should happen next.

Websites for reference

- From the Plain Language Association International: http://plainlanguagenetwork.org/plain-language/what-is-plain-language/
- From the Canadian Literacy and Learning Network: http://www.literacy.ca/research-and-resources/clear-writing-tools/
- Examples to assist with writing lay summaries, from the Heart and Stroke Foundation: http://hsf.ca/research/en/4-lay-reviewers-and-structures-lay-summaries
- *Plain Language, Clear and Simple*, a handbook intended for government authors that outlines how to write using plain language, available in English and French: http://publications.gc.ca/site/eng/9.644871/publication.html
- Plain Language Online Training from the National Institutes of Health (NIH): https://plainlanguage.nih.gov/CBTs/PlainLanguage/login.asp

Examples of Lay Summaries

Two examples of lay summaries are provided below. The "before" example was prepared by a researcher, who was surprised to learn it was written at a grade 14 level. This example was revised, with help from a group of citizens and is provided below as the "after" example.

Before: Original lay summary prepared by researcher
(Word count: 250, Grade level 14)

Those who provide care at home for a dying family member often face tremendous burden. Attention to family caregivers needs for support is therefore important to help protect their health. Home care nurses provide such support but because they are pressed for time, they tend to focus on the patient, and consideration of the family caregiver's needs is often informal and not written down in the chart. Family members are also reluctant to express their own needs. To address this gap, we have developed a brief intervention for assessing the support needs of family members providing care to dying persons at home. The Carer Support Needs Assessment Tool (CSNAT) intervention has the potential to benefit the health and well-being of family caregivers. In this project we will train home care nurses to use the CNAT intervention with a group of family caregivers (intervention group) and compare their quality of life, burden and other outcomes, to a group of family caregivers whose home care nurse is not using CSNAT. We will also interview family caregivers and home care nurses to gain a better understanding of how the CSNAT works in practice. Findings will allow us to determine the effectiveness of using the CSNAT as an intervention to identify, monitor and address family caregiver support needs in palliative home care.

After: Revised lay summary

(Word count; 223, Grade level 8)

Those who care for a dying family member or friend at home often carry a heavy burden. Although these caregivers rarely convey their own needs, they too need support and to take care of their own health.

Home care nurses can provide support to family and friend caregivers. However, they usually do not have time to. Most of their focus is on the patient.

We have created a tool that nurses can use to support caregiver needs. This intervention is called the Carer Support Needs Assessment Tool (CSNAT). We do not know if it will affect the health and well-being of caregivers yet. Therefore, we will assess the use of the CSNAT in practice for the first time, in this study.

To do this, we will compare two groups of caregivers. One group will receive support from a trained home care nurse using the CSNAT. The other group will receive support from a nurse that is not using the CSNAT. The quality of life, burden, and other outcomes of caregivers will be compared after the nurse intervention. We will also interview caregivers and home care nurses about how the CSNAT works in practice. This will help us understand if the CSNAT can help support and improve the lives of caregivers at home with a dying family member or friend.

Canadian Frailty Network (CFN)

Canadian Frailty Network is a not-for-profit interdisciplinary national network focused on frailty. Our mandate is to improve the care of older adults living with frailty, and support their families and caregivers. We do this by increasing frailty recognition and assessment, by providing evidence for decision making, by moving evidence into policy and practice, by training the next generation to care for this vulnerable population, and by advocating for change in health and social care systems to ensure that the needs of this vulnerable population are met.

CFN values the meaningful involvement of citizens – patients, and their family/friend caregivers, as well as the general public – in all aspects of our activities. The **Citizen Engagement Committee (CEC)** is a group of individuals within the CFN Network community who collaborate with CFN to make this happen.

Our researchers are required to follow these guidelines when producing lay summaries, and summaries undergo citizen review.