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DCR'S PLAIN LANGUAGE APPROACHES TO WRITING A SUMMARY FOR THE GENERAL PUBLIC

NOTE: PLAIN LANGUAGE SUMMARIES HAS REPLACED THE TERM "LAY SUMMARY"

Words

Choose words carefully. If 1 word can replace 3 words, use 1 word. For example, replace "in the event of" with "if."

Avoid jargon, acronyms, and specialized language. Instead of zoonoses, use diseases spread from animals to humans.

Define unfamiliar terms. When using comorbidity, define it as diseases or conditions usually occurring together.

Use "you" and other pronouns. Avoid "the patient"; directly address the reader as "you." Use "we."

Turn noun phrases into verbs. Many times, sentences can be simplified by making nouns (commonly ending in -ment or -ion) into verbs.

Sentences

Use active voice. Put the subject, verb, and object close together. For instance, write "participants completed questionnaires," instead of "the questionnaires were completed by participants."

Restrict each sentence to one idea. If you use a comma and a coordinating conjunction, such as "yet" or "but," remember to limit each sentence to one topic.

Keep sentences short. Shorter sentences help break up complex information into digestible chunks.

Paragraphs

Start paragraphs with topic sentences. Topic sentences are guiding ideas for paragraphs. Use 1 main idea per topic sentence (and paragraph).

Include only one topic per paragraph. For PLS, paragraphs are 2–3 interrelated sentences. Put similar information with similar information.

Sections

Keep sections short. Sections logically connect topics from paragraphs.

Use section headings for easy scanning. There are 3 types of headings: topic, statement, and question. For complex topics, use questions as headings.

Format and Style

Limit acronyms. Use acronyms, initialisms, and abbreviations only when unavoidable.

Use lists, tables, and bullets. Formatting content so it stands apart from regular text makes important information more visible.

Use person-first and identify-first language as appropriate. Avoid unwanted disease and condition descriptors as adjectives (unless recommended).

Cut excess words. To simplify, remove extra words. Remember to tell your readers what they need to know (not what you want to tell them).