

## **Synthesis: Plain Language Summary**

Rosenberg et al. (2021), *Current Medical Research and Opinion*, 37: 11, 2015-2016.

### **Style**

- Understandable language – writing in language that is easy to understand and unbiased, which means it does not include technical language and is inclusive and accessible to all readers
- Text based – Short and succinct text (250 words or less) that allows for indexing in directories like PubMed, facilitating straight-forward meaning
- For a broad audience – Targets a broad, inclusive, and non-technical/non-expert, or time-challenged audience

### **Content**

- Consistent - Reliable with same overall key points and conclusions as the scientific publication abstract
- Linked to the evidence – Explicitly linked to the source publication citation and relevant clinical trial identifiers with reference to the existing evidence

### **Process**

- Co-developed – Developed along with main content of the manuscript, referencing with authorship criteria for venue
- User tested – Ideally reviewed by a non-expert during development
- Peer reviewed – Fully peer reviewed alongside the main content
- Free to read – Made available to read free of charge alongside scientific publication abstract
- Tagged with metadata – Tagged with appropriate metadata and keywords to improve discoverability in search engines, directories, and indexes

## Writing Process: Plain Language Summary Heuristic

- Before you start writing
  - Who is your audience?
  - What is your purpose?
  - What do you want your readers to remember?
- Structuring your writing
  - How will readers use and access your PLS?
  - Include a title, table of contents, headings, background, and summary.
- Composing
  - Write in informal language, appropriate for a conversation over dinner
  - What is the context? What is new? What is the impact?
  - Use shorter sentences.
  - Group similar ideas together to accessibly share technical concepts.
- Formatting
  - Be consistent.
  - Are you effectively using white space, margins, and justification?
  - Have you formatted tables and figures consistently?
- Before you submit
  - Proofread and field-test your document by arranging for external individuals to review your summary.

## 10 Principles for Plain Language

Plain Language Act of 2010 requires government agencies to use plain language when communicating with the public. The [National Archives have outlined 10 principles](#) to follow to achieve plain language.

- Write for your reader, not yourself. Use pronouns when you can.
- State your major point(s) first before going into details.
- Stick to your topic. Limit each paragraph to one idea and keep it short.
- Write in active voice. Use the passive voice only in rare cases.
- Use short sentences as much as possible.
- Use everyday words. If you must use technical terms, explain them on the first reference.
- Omit unneeded words.
- Keep the subject and verb close together.
- Use headings, lists, and tables to make reading easier.
- Proofread your work and have a colleague proof it as well.

While these principles are explicit, they are broad enough to accommodate a writer inserting their personal voice into their work. These principles shouldn't hinder your writing; they should act as scaffolding to support your piece and your efforts toward creating effective content.

from [Content Science Review](#)

## Plain Language Checklist

Plain language is communication your audience understands the first time they read it or hear it. Use this checklist to make your materials easier for your audience to understand:

### **Organize to serve the audience.**

- Know your audience and purpose before you begin.
- Put the most important message first.
- Present other information in order of importance to the audience.
- Break text into logical chunks and use headings.

### **Choose words carefully.**

- Write in the active voice.
- Choose words and numbers your audience knows
- Strive for an average of 20 words per sentence. Limit each sentence to 1 idea.
- Limit paragraphs to 1 topic and 5 sentences.
- Use “you” and other pronouns.

### **Make information easy to find.**

- Use headings and text boxes.
- Delete unnecessary words, sentences, and paragraphs.
- Create lists and tables, if appropriate.

from the [Center for Disease Control & Prevention](#)