

What instructions are available to health researchers for writing lay summaries? A Scoping Review.

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Background

- A lay summary is a “brief summary that has been written for members of the public and an interested audience rather than specialists”¹.
- To guide authors, some journals and organisations publish instructions for writing lay summaries however, requirements differ and there are no universal instructions.
- Most lay summaries are written by the researcher and are a direct reflection of their work. This makes lay summaries a trustworthy source of health information and a potentially important means to communicate health research to the public².
- Use of jargon and high reading level shows opportunity for improvement of lay summaries

Objective

The aim of this study was to collect information on lay summary writing instructions from journals, health-professional and medical associations, funders and advocacy groups.

Methods

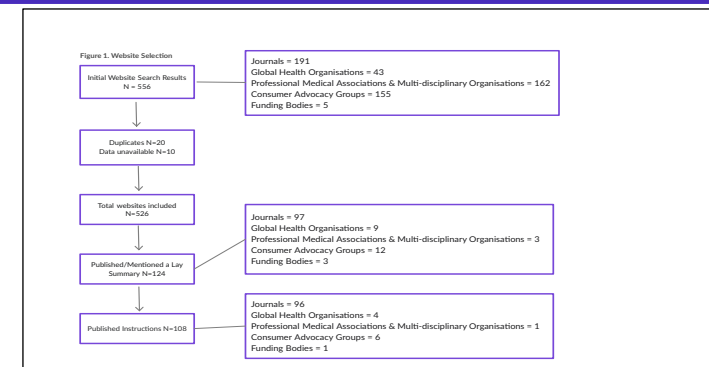
We searched the website of each identified information source to determine if they require, suggest or refer to lay summaries and extracted the instructions for writing lay summaries.

References

1. NIHR/INVOLVE. (n.d.). Plain English Summaries. Retrieved July 2020, from <https://www.invo.org.uk/resource-centre/plain-english-summaries/>
2. Statement on Consumer and Community Involvement in Health and Medical Research, National Health and Medical Research Council (2016), Consumers Health Forum of Australia.
3. Kirkpatrick E, Gaisford W, Williams E, Brindley E, Tembo D and Wright D. Understanding Plain English summaries. A comparison of two approaches to improve the quality of Plain English summaries in research reports. Res Invol Engagem. 2017;3:17. Available from: DOI 10.1186/s40900-017-0064-0

Key Results

- We searched 526 websites - 124 published or mentioned lay summaries & 108 provided sets of writing instructions.
- Most lay summaries were in journals, written by the author of the published paper and non-mandatory.
- From the instructions, the most common elements for lay summaries referred to: structure (80%), content (74%) and word count/length (69%).
- The least common were readability (3%) and use of jargon, acronyms and abbreviations (22%).
- We found 33 distinct labels for lay summaries.
- Over 60% of instructions did not specify a target audience.



Conclusions

- Lay summaries may not be reaching their primary audience, consumers.
- Consumer input into the development of lay summaries could be beneficial.

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