Writing a good lay summary of your research

When talking to the public, it is important to be able to explain your research in simple terms that get the key messages across. Getting bogged down in detail will confuse people and may result in your key message being misunderstood.

With this in mind, make your lay summary as clear and concise as possible. Do not make the assumption that the reader is knowledgeable about medicine, science or dementia research.

This guide will take you through some of the key points to consider when writing a lay summary.

Think about your audience

Remember that the people who will read your summary will be an interested audience but they are not specialists. Therefore, you should aim your summary at the same level as an article in a tabloid-style newspaper. It is always worth asking a non-specialist to read through your summary to ensure it can be clearly understood.

- Avoid complicated English or uncommon words.
- Avoid wherever possible using jargon and technical terms as these can alienate people. If you have to use them provide a clear explanation, for example:
  - Use ‘nerve cell’ instead of ‘neuron’.
  - ‘Shrinkage’ instead of ‘atrophy’.
  - ‘Problems with memory and thinking skills’ instead of ‘cognitive decline’.
  A full list of suggested ‘jargon-busters’ can be found in our Glossary.
- Remember that dementia isn’t a disease itself so refer to it as a condition.
- Usually papers are written in the passive voice, but when talking to the public the active voice works best; say ‘we will look at the build-up of amyloid in the brain’ rather than ‘the build-up of amyloid in the brain will be looked at’.
- Keep sentences short.
- If you are writing a longer piece, break up the text into sections and consider the use of bullet-point lists.

Keep in mind that many of those reading your summary may have loved ones with dementia, or have dementia themselves; as such think how your words may agitate or upset people. For instance, avoid words such as ‘abnormal’ and instead talk about ‘differences’ and refer to people as ‘volunteers’ rather than ‘subjects.’ When discussing the use of human tissue, such as a donated brain, acknowledge the donation.

Content

1. Start with the basics

What seems obvious to you will not necessarily be so for the audience you are reaching. It is worth starting any summary of your work by explaining what dementia is and how it affects people.
2. What will you achieve and why is it important?

It is important to clearly state what you are trying to achieve and why it is relevant to your audience. People are interested in how your work could lead to a preventative measure, treatment or new diagnostic technique, so try to frame your work in this context. For instance, if you are studying a molecular mechanism involved in the processing of amyloid precursor protein, relate this to trying to find a way to stop the build-up of amyloid in the brain.

3. How will you do the research?

State how you are carrying out the research (in cells in a dish, in animals or in people) so that the reader has some context about how relevant this is to people with dementia. Please take a look at our ‘Why Research Using Animals can Help Defeat Dementia’ booklet to find out more about discussing the use of animals in research.

4. Seeing the bigger picture

Remember to discuss why this work is necessary. Tell people about the bigger picture, the gap your work aims to fill and take them on the journey of how you are doing that. You need to convince people why your project is important in helping us make breakthroughs possible and how this particular study will take us closer to that goal.

If you have any questions or would like advice about how to best describe your work to the public, please get in touch with Claire Bromley (Claire.Bromley@alzheimersresearchuk.org).