

Plain language summaries: Guidance for METADAC applications

A well written plain-language summary (PLS) is an essential part of the METADAC application and approval process. **One of the main reasons METADAC applications are held up is that the PLS doesn't meet the requirements below or doesn't describe the project.** Provision of a PLS is a condition of Tissue Bank Approval (ethical approval) for biobank resources.

The PLS **will be published on the METADAC website** where it is available to study participants, the public, media, other researchers and funders.

What is a plain language summary?

The plain language summary is a stand-alone summary of the proposed research project. It should not simply be copied from other project descriptions but needs to be written afresh.

The PLS should use plain English aimed **at a reading age of 12 years and for a non-English speaking audience**. Consider using a readability checker such as <https://readable.io/>.

Avoid technical terms and jargon or explain them clearly if they are unavoidable. Examples of jargon are clinical and methodological terms, as well as words that have slightly different meanings in science than in common use (e.g. local, blind, control). Consider using a plain language glossary such as <https://www.lib.umich.edu/taubman-health-sciences-library/plain-language-medical-dictionary>.

Above all, the PLS should convey clearly the key question and purpose of the project. The goal of writing in plain language is to enable readers to understand the content the first time they read it.

What should the summary include?

Your summary needs to address the following questions:

1. What is the research question? Why is it important?
2. How will the participants' data be used to investigate the research question?
3. What is the method, in plain language?
4. What are the potential benefits or implications of your proposed research? This may include short term outcomes or longer term impact.

The lay summary should focus on how data from METADAC studies contribute to the work. You must make sure the plain language summary is consistent with the scientific project description submitted for approval.

Who is the plain language summary for?

- The METADAC committee. The summary explains the project for the Committee members, who all have different types of expertise.
- The longitudinal studies that provide the data and samples. Studies' leadership boards read the summaries, to learn how the resource is used and to inform future strategy.
- The funders of the METADAC and its longitudinal studies. The funders want to know the scope and potential impact of the work that is being proposed.
- Researchers. The PLS for approved projects can be viewed online by other researchers. The research themes and broad methodology show what areas of research are already under investigation.

- Study participants. Participants can see how their personal data contributes to current knowledge. They need to understand what questions are being researched, how their data is contributing to this, and the potential benefits of the work – without getting bogged down in technicalities.

Tips for writing in plain language

- Limit sentences to one key point.
- Use short paragraphs.
- Be careful with words or phrases with dual or nuanced meanings (e.g. drugs; diet).
- Avoid technical words, jargon or words that are long or have many syllables. Consider those who do not have English as a first language.
- Avoid unnecessary technical details if you can make the same point in plain language.
- If you must use technical vocabulary, provide a short definition of your term when it is first introduced and do not use too many technical words together in one sentence.
- Do not include citations to research literature.
- Avoid more than two technical words in a sentence unless you explain them.
- Consider introducing an acronym or shorter term for repeated use.
- Write for an international audience. Avoid words or terms that are region-specific (A&E versus ER).
- Use the active voice (For example, use “previous research showed that...” rather than “it was shown in previous research that...”).
- Keep within the word limit of 100-200 words.

Sources

This guidance was developed by study participant members of the METADAC Committee with the Secretariat and is based on (but not limited to) the following resources*:

- Cochrane Reviews Guidance - <http://editorial-unit.cochrane.org/sites/editorial-unit.cochrane.org/files/public/uploads/PLSBooklet2.pdf>
- National Institute for Health Research (INVOLVE)- <http://www.invo.org.uk/resource-centre/plain-english-summaries/>
- Access to Understanding - <http://www.access2understanding.org/guidance/>
- The Plain Language Campaign - <http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/free-guides.html>

* Applicants may wish to use these resources for additional guidance – e.g. – for example the plain language campaign link has dictionaries of alternative terminology.