



Tips for writing a non-technical summary for lay readers

The non-technical summary should be written in Dutch. If you do not speak and write Dutch, you can write it in English and ask a colleague to translate it. This is why we offer these writing tips in English also.

5 general writing tips

Writing for laypeople is different from writing for your colleagues. Besides needing to provide lay people with some background and the context, you also have to do more just to keep them interested. A colleague has to read your article, but a layperson will only read your story if you've aroused their interest and can keep it. If you want your story to be read by a wide audience, you'll have to convince every one of your readers to keep on reading.

Here are a few general tips to help you succeed:

1. Structure your story as a conversation with your reader
If you're at a school reunion telling someone about your research, you don't start with the technical details. You start with the "what": what are you doing, and you tell it in a way that connects with that person's world. Then he or she asks questions: why, how, with whom? When you write down what your research is about, you'll imagine yourself what your readers will be asking about. If you do this right, you'll anticipate and answer the questions your readers are about to ask, and entice them along.
2. One subject per paragraph, one idea per sentence
In a readable piece, every paragraph consists of three sentences: a topic sentence in which you present the subject, a sentence with an argument or explanation, and if possible, a sentence providing an example. A text can be read in many ways; you can slowly read a novel with deep concentration, or quickly scan a web page looking for a phone number. The latter method best describes your non-specialist readers. It's likely that a reader may only read the first sentence of each paragraph. If you've structured your story so that it can be followed this way, you will still have gotten your message across, even though someone may not have read every sentence.
3. Connect your sentences and paragraphs with linking words
Journalists have identified the points at which a newspaper article "loses" readers. Because of these points, only 5% of the people who read the headline actually make it to the last paragraph. The triggers for quitting include the end of a column, a difficult word, a mathematical formula, a sentence they have to read over again to understand, or an overly long paragraph. One aspect you can influence as a writer is the transitions between paragraphs. Take your reader by the hand and lead him or her to the next paragraph with linking words, such as "in addition", "because", "for example", "however", "since". In Dutch, these are words like "en ook", "daardoor", "zo", "maar", "daarom", "want".
4. Let verbs work, don't break up thoughts, and keep it brief
Have you ever read a policy paper from a government ministry? Did you get to the end of it? If not, it probably suffered from one or more of the following ailments: passive voice (mice were used vs. we used mice), nominalization (using nouns when verbs work better e.g. we are working on an improvement in scores vs. we are trying to improve scores), discontinuous structure (there is no doubt that, if he works hard, he will surely succeed) and long-windedness.

5. Beware of jargon

Jargon is convenient as it enables you to avoid wordiness and explanations. However, remember that it only works for those readers in your field who are familiar with it, people who really understand what you mean by “antigen presentation”. Anyone else will feel left out and will stop reading. Also, look out for words that mean something else in your field than in everyday use, such as “model”.

5 tips especially for the NTS

1. The guideline says only that you are writing the NTS for “the general public” without specifying what that means. For Dutch government agencies, it means a specific level of education comparable to having finished (Dutch) secondary school. The best thing to do is imagine someone who has a completely different occupation than yours, but is interested. Pretend you have to explain to this person why this experiment is important.
2. Don't confuse objective and results. In “Objective” (3.1 “Doelstelling”) you explain the more general social or scientific significance of your research, for example, “finding a drug to treat arthritis”. In “Scientific Results” (3.2 “Opbrengsten”), you explain how your research contributes to the objective, for example, “increasing knowledge about side effects and effectiveness of these medicines”.
3. Someone reading only sections 3.1 and 3.2 should be able to understand what you aim to do and why. Don't hide essential information in the other sections.
4. Make sure you put the right information in the right place, and don't provide more information than you're asked to. For example, in “Negative outcomes” (3.4 “Negatieve gevolgen”) explain the nature of the discomfort, and in “Severity” (3.5 “Ernst”) only whether the discomfort is light, moderate or severe (and thus not an elaboration about the nature of it or a justification of it).
5. Note that “Verfijning” (“Refinement”) contains two different questions: why you are using animals of this species, and what you are doing to minimize their suffering.