

Open Pharma recommendations for multi-stakeholder plain language summaries of publications

Plain language summaries of publications give all stakeholders an opportunity to engage in effective discussions around medical research. This enables fully informed and shared decision-making. The broad range of stakeholders engaging with pharmaceutical research now puts the pharmaceutical industry in a unique position to make the medical publishing model more open. Open Pharma believes the next step of openness is enabling a more accessible and equitable future through the use of plain language summaries.

There are many formats of plain language summaries that vary in their goals to reach different audiences, but plain text is the most discoverable format through indexing in directories such as PubMed. Standardizing the minimum steps for creating and sharing index-friendly plain language summaries can help ensure that these multi-stakeholder communication channels are effective and compliant forms of presenting research. The aim of a minimum standard is to provide a universal foundation to improve the accessibility, discoverability and inclusivity of plain language summaries as a basis from which enhanced formats – or summaries written with a more specific target audience in mind – can be developed when appropriate.

Open Pharma believes that, as a minimum standard, publications should include a plain language summary in the style of an abstract that is clearly understood and readable, free of expert jargon, unbiased, non-promotional and easily accessed.

As a minimum standard, we recommend that plain language summaries of publications are:

- targeted towards a broad and non-technical or time-poor audience
- written in easily understandable, unbiased language that is free of expert jargon
- text based, concise (of 250 words or less) and formatted in continuous prose – this allows for improved discoverability through indexing in directories such as PubMed and facilitates straightforward or automated translation
- explicitly linked to the source publication, with brief reference to the evidence within the wider context of the literature
- consistent with the same overall conclusions as the accompanying scientific abstract
- developed alongside the main content of the manuscript, with authors responsible for approving the final submitted version, in line with the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors' authorship criteria
- fully peer reviewed alongside the main content
- made available to read free of charge – either free to share and reuse under an appropriate Creative Commons licence or hosted without paywalls in hybrid or subscription journals alongside the scientific abstract
- tagged with appropriate metadata and descriptions to improve discoverability in search engines, directories and indexes.