Writing plain language summaries: Connecting with a wider audience

Shivanee Shah, PhD, ELS
Head of Content, Impact Science
Cactus Communications
Why?

Researcher: "my research involves high-fidelity magnetic intensity records.

WOW! FASCINATING!

What you think you sound like.

The Public: "Wah wah wah wah wah wah wah wah

What you actually sound like."
Traditionally...

- 1-way communication
- Single-format content
- Limited engagement with wider audience
With adoption of enhanced content formats...

JOURNAL
2-way communication

CORE AUDIENCE
Multiple-format content

WIDER AUDIENCE
Engagement with wider audience
How?

- Research communication
- Plain language summaries/press notes
- Infographics
- Videos
- Podcasts
The title should be crisp and catchy in simple language, and <15 words

The first paragraph should cover what the study is about. The text should answer the questions Who, What, Where, When, Why, How as relevant?

The second paragraph should convey why the study is important. What are the key findings, the novelty of the study, how has the study contributed to the existing body of research, how is the study beneficial to others.

The total length of a plain language summary should ideally be around 300 words.
Short Title that is Crisp and Catchy

- Brief introduction to the study in 1-2 sentences
- Brief methods to set up the findings
- Key findings – use different ways to represent the data instead of the figures from the paper

Include graphics as relevant

Study question?

Key message

Publication details: Author names, manuscript title, journal name, year of publication, DOI

Logo
Asymmetric Disclosure of Bad News by Firms Under Control Threat

During corporate control events like mergers and acquisitions, acquirers target firms with good performance records. Negative news disclosures from target firms increase uncertainty about their value, reducing any threat of a takeover attempt.

Do firms under control threat promote voluntary disclosure of bad news?

Results from 112 hostile takeover announcements were analyzed using a difference-in-differences technique to study disclosures made by:

- Treatment firms facing takeover threats
- Control firms in the same industry

Peer firms under control threat:

- Forecasted more bad news
- Bundled bad news forecasts with earnings announcements
- Were more likely to manage their accruals downward
- Used a more negative tone in conference calls and presentations and highlighted the visibility of negative news

Results were especially pronounced in firms with greater takeover threat, like those with:

- Younger or higher-paid CEOs
- Weaker provisions to prevent takeovers

Firms under control threat highlight bad news through voluntary disclosures to prevent potential takeover attempts.
Some Do’s and Don’ts

- Keep it simple – remember the target audience, avoid jargon
- Keep it concise – most folks don’t have time to read lengthy articles
- Ensure that the key message is clear – what do you want the reader to take away?
- Focus on the narrative – everyone likes a good story!
- Include a visual if possible – pictures are worth a thousand words...