



National Institute for
Health Research

Writing an excellent plain English abstract

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CLAHRC West

(Collaboration for Leadership in Applied
Health Research and Care West)

Plain English...

A horizontal bar composed of several colored segments: green, dark green, orange, purple, red, dark blue, and light blue.

...why bother?

Why bother?

A horizontal bar composed of several colored segments: green, dark green, orange, purple, red, dark blue, and light blue.

- Principle of accessibility, transparency (not 'dumbing down')

Why bother?



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- Make research relevant to the real world

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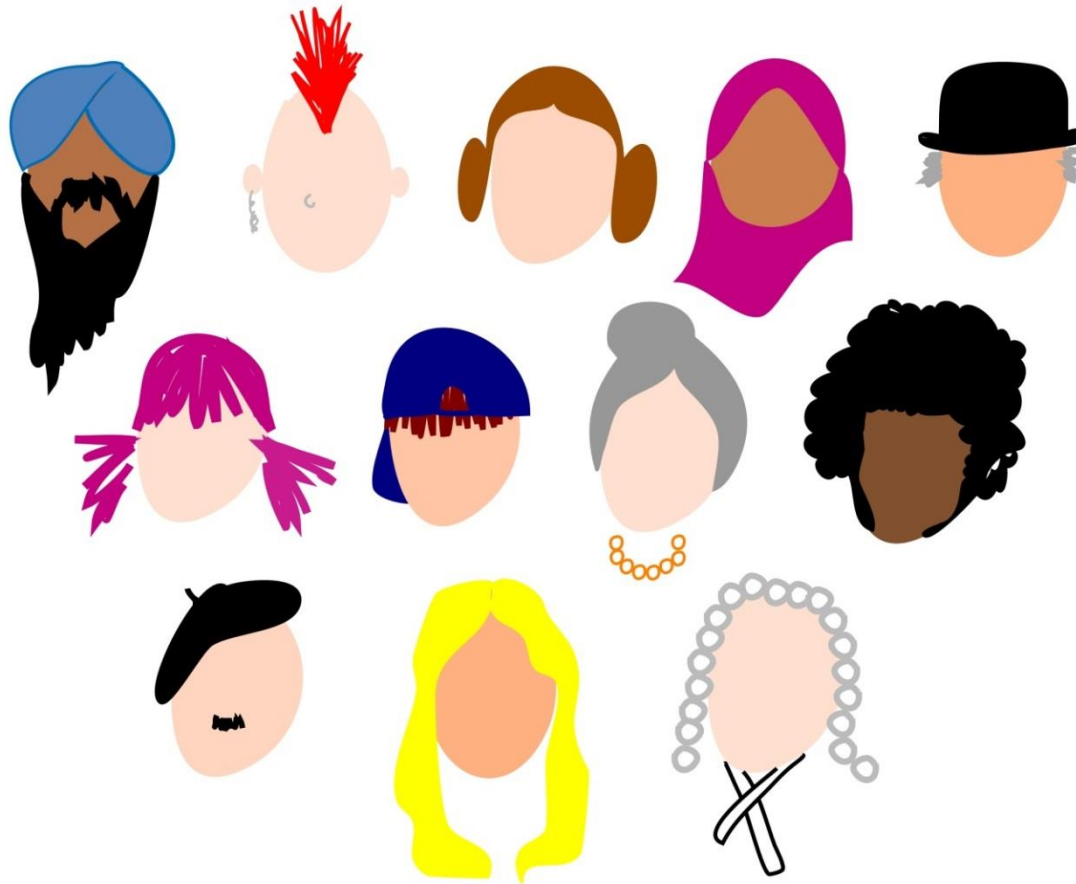
- Principle of accessibility, transparency (not ‘dumbing down’)
- Make research relevant to the real world
- Not all funding panels will be experts in your field

Why bother?

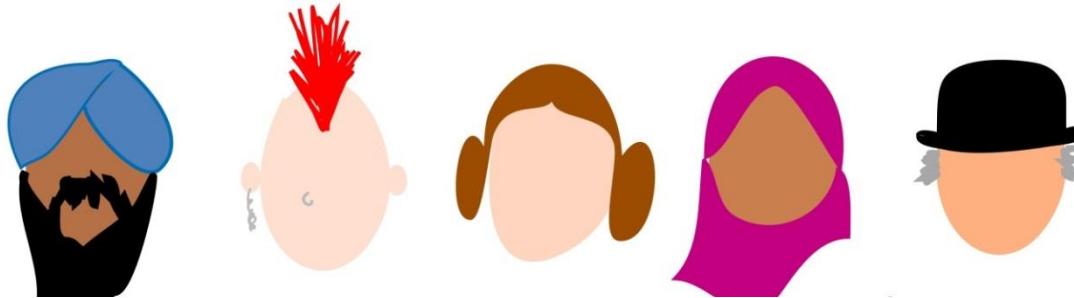
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- Principle of accessibility, transparency (not ‘dumbing down’)
- Make research relevant to the real world
- Not all funding panels will be experts in your field
- Money – and by extension, getting your research actually done

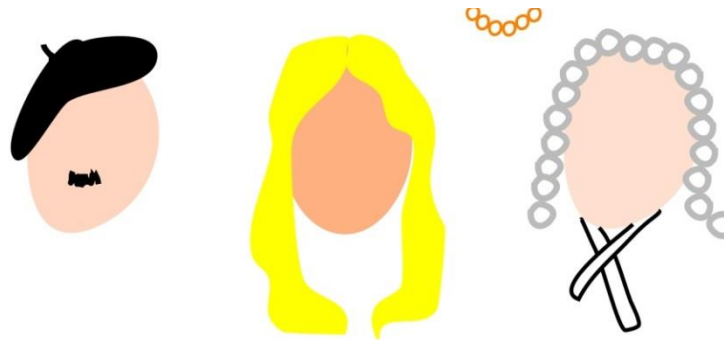
Audience



Audience



Write **for** someone
not **about** something



Focus on...



- What are you trying to achieve?
- Who are you trying to influence?
- What do you want them to do?
- What are your key messages?

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- **What are your key messages?**

How people read

A horizontal bar composed of seven colored segments: green, dark green, orange, purple, red, dark blue, and light blue.

What's the average 'reading age' in the UK?

How people read

A horizontal bar composed of seven colored segments: green, dark green, orange, purple, red, dark blue, and light blue.

What's the average 'reading age' in the UK?

9 years

How a 9 year old reads

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By the time you are 9, you're building up your 'common words'.

Your primary set is around 5,000 words in your vocabulary.

Your secondary set is around 10,000 words.

Try using the 'up-goer'

<http://splasho.com/upgoer5/>



THE UP-GOER FIVE TEXT EDITOR

CAN YOU EXPLAIN A HARD IDEA USING ONLY THE [TEN HUNDRED](#) MOST USED WORDS? IT'S NOT VERY EASY. TYPE IN THE BOX TO TRY IT OUT.

Health

UH OH! YOU HAVE USED A NON-PERMITTED WORD (HEALTH)

INSPIRED BY [XKCD](#). (THE IMAGE IS FROM [#386](#))
CREATED BY [THEO SANDERSON](#). HOW DOES IT [WORK?](#)

[Follow @theosanderson](#)

Context is important

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“We explain all unusual terms on GOV.UK. This is because you can understand 6-letter words as easily as 2-letter words – if they’re in context.”

As George Orwell said...

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“Never use a long word when a
short one will do.”

Four principles of clear writing

When writing and editing, we should aim to:

- Keep an audience in mind – it's easier to write well when you think about the reader
- Be clear and concise, avoiding unnecessary or overly complex words and phrases
- Speak directly and personally to the reader
- Be easy to follow and act on

Exercise 1

A horizontal bar composed of several colored segments: green, dark green, orange, purple, red, dark blue, and light blue.

Compare the two descriptions.

Which is easier to read?

Why?

Avoid jargon

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“Special words or expressions used by a profession or group that are difficult for others to understand”


Avoid jargon



“Special words or expressions used by a profession or group that are difficult for others to understand”


variables data spread P value
sample size variance
confidence interval these data

Words and phrases to chop or replace




prior to both is able to therefore
currently in the process utilise
may be able to at a later date
nevertheless that in addition to
regards bring to an end make a decision
facilitate in the event of ongoing

Come up with alternatives to . . .

- 
- Additional
 - Commence
 - Consequently
 - Ensure
 - In accordance with
 - In excess of
 - In respect of
 - In the event of
 - On receipt
 - On request
 - Particulars
 - Per annum
 - Persons
 - Prior to

Remove the unnecessary words



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The draft community engagement proposal that was received from the local hospital


Remove the unnecessary words



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Health Research

The draft community engagement proposal ~~that was~~
~~received~~ from the local hospital


Remove the unnecessary words



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Health Research

We are currently in the process of preparing a public involvement strategy to be launched in May 2017

Remove the unnecessary words



National Institute for
Health Research

We are ~~currently in the process of~~ preparing a public involvement strategy to be launched in May 2017

But, word count can be a red herring



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But, word count can be a red herring



NHS

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Defenestration

But, word count can be a
red herring



NHS

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Defenestration = throwing someone out
of a window

Tone of voice

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It's not just about choosing
easy to understand words

Tone of voice is vital, too

Active vs passive

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In a sentence **written** in the **active** voice, the subject of the sentence performs the action. In a sentence **written** in the **passive** voice the subject receives the action.

Use the active voice 80-90 per cent of the time

Passive: A report *was published*, in which the options for reducing patient waiting lists were set out.

Active: *We published* a report with options for reducing patient waiting lists.

Passive: *It was demonstrated* that heart attacks *can be caused* by high stress.

Active: Researchers *showed* that high stress *can cause* heart attacks.

Use direct language



‘There is a possibility that this intervention could help reduce...’

‘This intervention may help reduce...’

‘There is evidence that suggests...’

‘Evidence suggests...’

Avoid 'nominalisations'



The name of something that isn't a physical object, formed from verbs:

- Complete – completion
- Introduced – introduction
- Provide – provision
- Fail – failure
- Arrange – arrangement
- Implement – implementation

Avoid them!

‘Academic-ese’

A horizontal bar composed of several colored segments: green, dark green, orange, purple, red, dark blue, and light blue.

The wordy English associated with academic (and clinical) writing, which creates a barrier to understanding for the average reader.

'Academic-ese'

A horizontal bar composed of seven colored segments: light green, dark green, orange, purple, red, dark blue, and light blue.

Persons

'Academic-ese'

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Persons = people

'Academic-ese'



Persons = people

Males

Interventions

Females

Acceptability

Desirability

To this end

Key informants

Moreover

Disproportionately

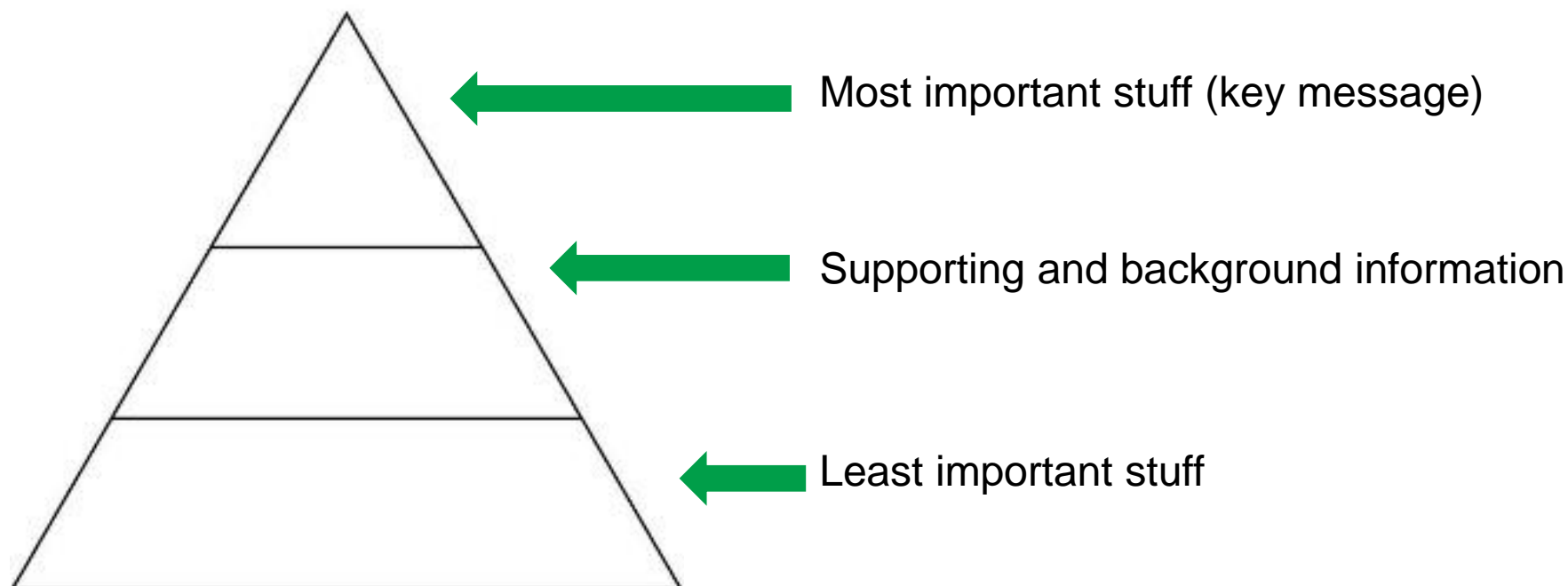
Comorbidity

Acronyms

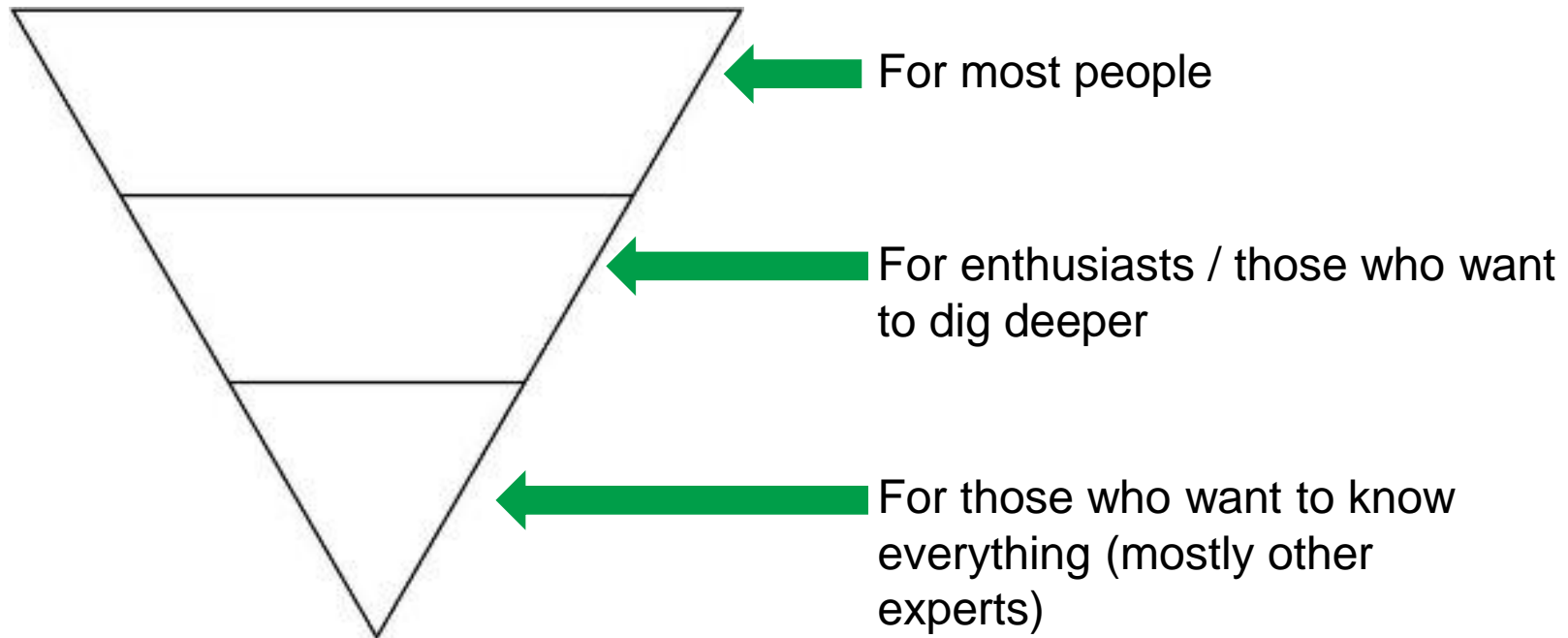


- Avoid them if you can
- If you can't avoid them, spell them out the first time they're used
- But it's better to use 'the Trust' rather 'UHBristol' or 'NBT'
- **Always** avoid academic-ese acronyms like
 - PWID (people who inject drugs)
 - MSM (men who have sex with men)
 - PPI (patient and public involvement)

Get to the point!



Audience goes the other way



And layout really, really helps

- Break up your copy into readable bite-sized chunks
- Use hierarchical headings to break up copy and orient your readers
- Make the headings meaningful – not clever
- Focus on one idea per paragraph
- Use bullet points to organise and summarise content

In summary...



- Plan: think about your audience and the message you want them to take away
- Write sentences that make a point
- Keep paragraphs short
- Use punchy headings and easy to understand diagrams and tables
- Keep it personal: use I, you, we
- Be active and direct, avoiding 'it is' and 'there are'
- Delete any unnecessary words that don't add value
- Keep jargon to a minimum
- Punctuate: bullet lists will make your writing easier to read, but don't overdo them!
- Make time to proofread, read it out loud and get someone else to read it too, if possible

And for grant summaries



Focus on:

- The challenges / issues being addressed
- The potential contribution the research will make
- The wider potential benefit

Exercise 2



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Three golden rules

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1. If possible, pass your copy by someone who isn't from your discipline...

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2. Share with your friendly local communications team / person....

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1. If possible, pass your copy by someone who isn't from your discipline... someone who isn't even an academic!
2. Share with your friendly local communications team / person.... But remember, professionals who work closely with scientists can 'go native'

Three golden rules



1. If possible, pass your copy by someone who isn't from your discipline... someone who isn't even an academic!
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3. Make this 'business as usual'...

Three golden rules



1. If possible, pass your copy by someone who isn't from your discipline... someone who isn't even an academic!
2. Share with your friendly local communications team / person.... But remember, professionals who work closely with scientists can 'go native'
3. Make this 'business as usual'... at CLAHRC West we have a plain language panel to review our summaries

Principles of plain English

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- Stop and think before you start writing
- Prefer short words
- Use everyday English whenever possible
- Keep your sentence length down to an average of 15 to 20 words
- Use active verbs as much as possible
- Be concise
- Imagine you are talking to your reader
- Get someone else - who's not from your discipline - to read it

Thanks!

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