Why we care about good writing

(and why you should too)

We all know grant applications are a very time-consuming exercise – writing them *and* reviewing them. So why should you devote even more time to perfecting one particular section of your Canadian Cancer Society grant application: the non-scientific summary? Because a well-written summary, like any good piece of writing, will save time and effort in the end. For you and for anyone who reads it.

Non-scientific summaries are very important tools for the Canadian Cancer Society. They are what our community representatives read during grant and award review panels. And later they are used to promote successful projects with media, donors, volunteers and Canadians in general.

In a nutshell, the non-scientific summary is probably your best way to communicate with the public in your own words about the potential impact and value of your research. Unfortunately, the language used in most applicants' summaries is far too complex for a general audience and the message is often lost. But there are things you can do to avoid this.

Let's start with the basics. We're not just talking about grammar and spelling. We're talking about plain language – the art of explaining your work in understandable terms.

Plain language, according to Human Resources and Social Development Canada, uses straightforward, concrete and familiar words. It means explaining concepts and procedures using examples and words that relate to your reader's experience, *not yours.*

And consider this: according to the most recent Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (2003), 42% of Canadians, or about 9 million people, scored below the desired literacy threshold. Using plain language will allow you to communicate more clearly and persuasively with all sorts of readers, and engage them in your ideas.

But, you may be thinking, plain language will insult skilled and knowledgeable readers, such as those reviewing your application during the Canadian Cancer Society's review panels. Not so! Plain language reaches all people: those who understand cancer research, those who don't and also those who don't have time to read and prefer to scan.

As Richard Lederer and Richard Dowis put it in *Sleeping Dogs Don't Lay* (1999), "Contrary to what some people seem to believe, simple writing is not the product of simple minds. A simple, unpretentious style has both grace and power."

The Plain English Campaign, for free guides and a list of alternative medical words:
http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/index.htm

And finally, by applying plain language to your non-scientific summary, you will gain invaluable practice at explaining your work in an easy-to-understand style. This will come in very handy for your next public presentation or media call, and probably even your next scientific paper.

So, if you're ready to embrace plain language, here are some tips to get you started:

1) Use everyday words, concrete words and short words in your writing. For example, collect vs. accumulate, use vs. utilize, new vs. novel, try vs. endeavour, find vs. elucidate, change vs. modification and make vs. synthesize.

2) Use short sentences. Generally, aim for one main idea per sentence.

3) Be careful with scientific jargon. Jargon can be useful, but only to people familiar with it. Otherwise, it obscures your message. For example, you can replace carcinogenesis with cancer development, neoplasm with tumour, proto-oncogene with cancer-causing gene, therapeutic strategy with treatment and proliferation with growth. This doesn't mean you can't ever use technical terms, you just need to define them if they must be included (see chart below for more examples).

4) Trim excess words. For example, you can often cut the following words and phrases from your writing: nonetheless, without a doubt, in many cases, as to whether, at this time, by means of, for a period of, in order to, with respect to, and first and foremost (see chart below for more examples).

5) Try and use active verbs instead of nouns. Decide instead of decision. Examine instead of examination. Propose instead of proposal.

6) Aim for a grade 8 to 10 reading level. This is the grade level needed to read a magazine like *Reader's Digest* or *Time*. In comparison, the level needed to read *Scientific American* is university or higher – and this is the level most of the non-scientific summaries we receive fall into. (Tip: there is a great feature in Microsoft

Word that provides readability statistics, including the grade level needed to understand your document. This story, for example, rated at grade 11.)

Good writing matters for most professions, and science and research are no exceptions. At a time when public demand for health and medical research is at its highest, it's in our best interest to inform people about what we're doing in cancer research – as accurately *and* as understandably as we can.

Some common technical terms used by cancer researchers, and suggestions for translation into plain language.

Before	After
novel	new
assay	test
modalities of therapy	treatments
apoptosis	natural cell death
oncogenesis/carcinogenesis	the start of cancer
mutation	change
C. elegans	a worm
Drosophila	a fruit fly
genome	full set of hereditary information
adjuvant treatment	treatment following another treatment
oncolytic virus	cancer-killing virus
telomere	a cap on the end of a chromosome
metastasis	the spread of cancer
hematapoietic	blood-related
mouse model	mouse
in vivo	in the body
in vitro	in a test tube
knockout	turned off
neoplasm	tumour
angiogenesis	formation of blood vessels
cohort	group