

COMMUNICATION NOTES

Reader-friendly Writing - 1-3-25

The Canadian Health Services Research Foundation has a mandate to fund a different kind of research — practically oriented work done in collaboration with the people who run the healthcare system, to answer their very concrete questions about how to make the system work better. That means a different style of writing for your final report.

Writing a research summary for decision makers is not the same as writing an article for an academic journal. It has a different objective, and it takes a different approach.

1:3:25

Every report prepared for the foundation has the same guidelines: start with one page of main messages; follow that with a three-page executive summary; present your findings in no more than 25 pages of writing, in language a bright, educated, but not research-trained person would understand.

Main Messages

The one in the foundation's 1:3:25 rule is one page of main message bullets. They are the heart of your report, the lessons decision makers can take from your research. Don't confuse them with a summary of findings: you have to go one step further and tell your audience what you think the findings mean for them. The messages, per se, may not even appear in the text. They are what can be inferred from your report. This is your chance, based on your research, to tell decision makers what implications your work has for theirs.

How to formulate them? Set aside your text and focus on expressing clear conclusions based on what you've learned. Consider your audience — who are they, and what do they most need to know about what you've learned? Summon up that bright, educated reader and answer this question for him or her: So what does this really mean? Say your study is on how to set budgets in a regional health system. You've found a tendency to keep money flowing on traditional lines. That's the problem. The actual main message you write may be that it's wiser to focus on reallocating other resources — people, space, equipment — to health promotion than to take cash away from acute care. A study on the impact of increasing use of homecare might show that hip-implant patients regain mobility faster out of hospital than as inpatients. The key message would be to encourage early discharge. Spell it out. Your study has found that job security is the biggest factor driving nurses to work in the U.S. Your main message might be that governments should make 10-year commitments to funding levels for nursing services. Writing main messages can be difficult for researchers to do, trained as they are to be detached and to collect evidence, rather than judge it, but it has to be done if research is to be of real use to decision makers. And remember — if you don't do it, you're leaving your work to be interpreted by someone else, who won't likely have your insight.

This is not to say that you have to come up with definitive recommendations from research that just doesn't offer them. Be as concrete as you can and then, if you're really not ready to draw more conclusions, don't just fall back on "more research is needed." Use your main messages to define the questions that still need to be asked.

Executive Summary

The three in 1:3:25 is the executive summary. These are your findings condensed to serve the needs of the busy decision maker, who wants to know quickly whether the report will be useful. Start by outlining what issues you were looking at, using language and examples a local hospital administrator or ministry official will understand; sum up the answers you found. An executive summary is not an academic abstract; it's much more like a newspaper story, where the most interesting stuff goes at the top, followed by the background and context and less important information further down. This is not the place for more than a line or two about your approach, methods and other technical details. Concentrate on getting the essence of your research across succinctly but not cryptically.

The Report: The foundation allots 25 pages for the complete report of your work (double-spaced with 12-point type and 2.5 cm margins). This may be a length you're more comfortable with, but don't lapse into academic style just because you have more room. Don't hesitate to use anecdotes or stories to get your point across. To make sure your writing suits the busy decision maker, intelligent and interested, but not an academic, take the time to show it to your decision-maker partners. What do they find most useful and interesting? How do they find your language and style? As a guide, the foundation has set seven categories that must be covered in the report, in the order given:

Context: outline the policy issue or managerial problem your research addresses. State the research question clearly. Highlight earlier research and the contribution current research may make. Anecdotes can work well here.

Implications: State what your findings mean for decision makers. Note what different types of audiences may be interested in your work, and if the research has different messages for those different audiences, separate and label them. Notes on how broadly the information can be generalized should go here. This is where the essence of your key messages is found.

Approach: Outline your methods, including the design of the study, the sources of data and details on the sample, the response rate and analysis techniques. Describe how you worked with decision makers on the project, and outline your plans for dissemination. Highly technical material can be an appendix; here you should focus on explaining why these details matter, how they might affect the study results and conclusions and why you chose one approach over another.

Results: Summarize your results to show how they support the conclusions you have presented, highlighting themes and messages. Use graphs and tables if they will improve understanding. Results that don't relate directly to the conclusions should be moved to an appendix.

Additional Resources: Not for other researchers — although they may find it useful — this is the place to give information on publications, web sites and other useful sources of information for decision makers.

Further Research: Outline gaps in knowledge; frame questions on management and policy issues you've identified and suggest studies to answer them.

References and Bibliography: References in the report should use consecutive superscript numbering and be presented as endnotes, not in the body of the text or the foot of the page. The bibliography should highlight those items most useful for decision makers and researchers wanting to do more reading and also include useful reading beyond that used in the report, including some easy-to-read pieces to give decision makers background. The references and bibliography count as part of the report's 25 pages, unless they are fully annotated, in which case they can be put into an appendix. Writing a research summary for decision makers is not the same as writing an article for an academic journal. It has a different objective, and it takes a different approach.

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