

When writing for the public about your dissertation

Begin by carefully planning what you want to convey.

Think about how programs on the National Public Radio address innovative and complex ideas. They present information and ideas in a format and with language that is appropriate for the audience. They deliberately start by engaging and then keep re-engaging the audience. And when time is short – for example, one minute – the information and ideas are presented clearly and concisely. A short narrative for the public about your research should be designed in the same way. Here are some tips:

- Don't exceed the word limit.
- Write it as if it is spoken rather than a printed abstract – that is, the sentences should be concise and flow.
- First paragraph is the hook; it should engage the audience.
- What is the big picture? What is the issue, problem or question?
- Engage the audience by indicating what's in it for them. Why should we care?
- Avoid jargon and words a lay person wouldn't understand. If necessary, use jargon but place it in a context that helps the reader.
- Highlight specific accomplishments.
- Last paragraph should provide conclusions, but not repeat things said. If only the last paragraph was read, would the reader understand the significance of your work?

Check to make sure the narrative is clear and organized well. Show a friend these guidelines and then read a draft of your narrative to him/her so you can get some advice on how it sounds. If it “sounds” good, then you are off to a good start.

If you have the opportunity to add illustrations (e.g., drawings, photographs, figures, charts, tables), do not simply pick among those in your dissertation. Your key points might be conveyed better by simpler or composite illustrations. Think about your audience. You want them to understand quickly even when you aren't present to explain.