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PHS 603

Lay summaries

Our first task is to define the genre as clearly and as specifically as possible

Our goal is to understand what we're aiming for

Only then can we make good choices about how to revise our own writing



What are they?

Summaries of research or technical subject matter for non-specialist/lay audiences

Audiences range from non-specialist to general public

Audience's knowledge level drives the level of detail (i.e., content) & vocabulary

Implications for writing a good lay summary?

Science: A Slinky that Lights the Sky

NASA's polar satellite has revealed **one of the power sources behind the gossamer glow of the aurora**: Alfvén waves, oscillations in Earth's magnetic field that resemble the quivering of a Slinky toy. John Wygant of the University of Minnesota and Andreas Keiling of the Center for Space Research on Radiation in Toulouse, France, used Polar's instruments to study energy flowing along the lines of the geomagnetic field. "Field lines have a certain tension. Charged particles are tied to those lines, so when the field wiggles around, they wiggle too," Wygant says. **Magnetic waves moving along those lines can catch electrons and accelerate them to speeds up to 30,000 miles a second. Eventually the particles crash into air molecules, giving up their energy in the form of the green, blue, red, and violet light of the aurora.**

Wherever Keiling and Wygant detected a powerful electromagnetic wiggling, the associated field lines led down to a region of the aurora. Polar's instruments also showed that the energy in each electron stream was proportional to the intensity of the display. **Similar Alfvén waves may transport energy away from the surface of the sun, heating the solar atmosphere to millions of degrees.**

What they don't have (usually):

Citations

Technical jargon

Metonymic reasoning

???

- **Limit your use of technical language**
- **Define essential technical terms**
- **Include background information to give some context for your subject matter**
- **Provide the details that connect your topic and its significance**
- **Explain significance explicitly and clearly (you can't expect non-specialist readers to fill in any gaps)**

How does the grant lay summary differ from a magazine lay summary?

Research Summary is an argument

What are you arguing?

Background section:

Identify clearly & concisely the general area

Identify concisely the specific project

Defines key terms (one or two)

Objectives:

State objectives (max. 3) clearly & concisely (i.e., use list)

Link objectives to discussion of topic in background section

Methods:

Link explicitly to objectives (i.e., To achieve obj. 1, I will . . .)

Include minimum of details to demonstrate competence

Significance:

Elaborate significance on theoretical, empirical & practical levels

Demonstrate how your project is superior to other peoples' projects

In groups, count these items:

Number of paragraphs:

Number of sentences in each paragraph:

Number of words in each sentence:

Divide the work up within your group—each person takes one paragraph, for example.