
UNIT TEN

ABSTRACTS

I	Research paper abstracts
II	Conference abstracts
III	Citations in conference abstracts
IV	Checklist

In this final section of the book, we are going to work on *two kinds of abstracts*. The first ones are to be placed at the beginning of a research paper (RP). In most situations, these will be abstracts based on texts that you have already written. Second, we will work on the conference abstract. In this case, you may or may not have a text to work from. (Based on: *John M. Swales and Christine B. Feak. Academic Writing for Graduate Students. A Course for Nonnative Speakers of English. – Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994.*)



I. RESEARCH PAPER ABSTRACTS

RP abstracts usually consist of a single paragraph containing about ten full sentences (they may be shorter than that). This kind of abstract is more important for the reader than for the writer.

There are two main approaches to writing RP abstracts. One of them is called the ‘results-driven’ abstract, because it concentrates on the research findings and what might be concluded from them. The other approach is to offer an ‘RP summary’ abstract, in which you provide one- or two-sentence synopses of each of the paper’s sections.

In both cases, the abstracts will be either *informative* or *indicative*. Indicative abstracts just indicate what kind of research has been done. Informative abstracts, in addition, give main results. *Most RP abstracts should aim to be informative*. However, this may not be possible with very long papers or with very theoretical ones (as in mathematics).

• **Task 1**

Read the two drafts of the abstracts for a mini-RP. Then answer the questions that follow.

Version A

A count of sentence connectors in 12 academic papers produced 70 different connectors. These varied in frequency from 62 tokens (*however*) to single occurrences. Seventy-five percent of the 467 examples appeared in sentence-initial position. However, individual connectors varied considerably in position preference. Some (e.g., *in addition*) always occurred initially; in other cases (e.g., *for example, therefore*), they were placed after the subject more than 50% of the time. These findings suggest that a research for general rules for connector position may not be fruitful.

Version B

Although sentence connectors are a well recognized feature of academic writing, little research has been undertaken on their position. In this study, we analyze the position of 467 connectors found in a sample of 12 research papers. Seventy-five percent of the connectors occurred at the beginning of sentences. However, individual connectors varied greatly in positional preference. Some, such as *in addition*, only occurred initially; others, such as *therefore*, occurred initially in only 40% of the cases. These preliminary findings suggest that general rules for connector position will prove elusive.

1. The journal requirements state that the abstracts accompanying papers should not exceed 100 words. Do versions A and B qualify?
2. Which version is 'results driven' and which is an 'RP summary'?
3. Compare the tense usage in versions A and B.
4. Which version do you prefer? Why?
5. Some journals also ask for a list of key words. Choose three or four suitable *key words*.

Language Focus: Linguistic Features of Abstracts

1. The use of full sentences;
2. The use of past tense (exceptions are quite common here, too);
3. The use of impersonal passive;

4. The avoidance of negatives;
5. The avoidance of abbreviation, jargon, symbols and other language ‘shortcuts’ that might lead to confusion.

• **Task 2**

Find five abstracts from a journal in your field and analyze them in terms of the above characteristics. To what extent do your findings agree with them?



II. CONFERENCE ABSTRACTS

This second type of abstract is somewhat different from the research paper abstract. It is usually much longer; most of a page or even two pages rather than one paragraph. It is independent. In other words, **whether you are accepted for the conference program depends entirely on how your conference abstract is perceived by the review panel, i.e. by members of the organizing committee.**

Your primary audience is, therefore, the conference reviewing committee. Appealing to the conference participants is a secondary consideration. At the beginning of this Unit, another difference was mentioned: it is very possible that you do not yet have a text to construct your abstract out of it. Finally, it is also possible that you have not completed all the work for your RP. In effect, your abstract may not be entirely *informative*.

In consequence of these and other factors, conference abstracts are much more of ‘**selling job**’ than RP abstracts. As a result, most conference abstracts have an opening section that attempts to

- ◆ create a research space,
- ◆ impress the review committee, and
- ◆ appeal (if accepted) to as large an audience as possible.

• **Task 3**

Here is a successful conference abstract in the field of business management. Read it and do the tasks that follow.

Speed and Innovation in Cross-functional Teams

(1) The competitive and uncertain business environment of the 1990s requires an accelerated product development process with greatly improved coordination and integration among cross-functional teams (Denison, Kahn and Hart 1991). (2) Their successful product development effort suggests that speed and variety in perspective and expertise are compatible. (3) Although product development using cross-functional teams has been drawing much attention from academics as well as the corporate world, research into its organization and processes is still underdeveloped. (4) This deficiency is significant because the traditional literature on decision making has assumed that speed and variety are, in reality, incompatible. (5) This paper elaborates the process of cross-functional team efforts, based on interviews and observations over a two-year period. (6) A model is developed and operationalized with 22 survey measures and tested with data from 183 individuals on 29 teams. (7) Results show that product development using cross-functional teams is highly correlated with time compression, creativity, capability improvement, and overall effectiveness.

1. Identify all the instances where the author uses *evaluative* language to strengthen his case for the acceptability of his research.

2. Find the instances of *metadiscourse* (i.e., when the author talks about his or her own text).

3. Where is the division between the ‘scene setting’ and the actual study?

4. Why do you think the abstract was accepted?

5. Where do you suppose the author was in his study when he wrote his conference abstract?

a. Almost everything had been done.

b. All the data had been collected and analyzed, but the model was not yet developed.

c. The data had been collected, but only analyzed in a preliminary way in order to get a sense of where it was going.



III. CITATIONS IN CONFERENCE ABSTRACTS

In many cases, a conference abstract is read and assessed very quickly — maybe in only a few minutes. Under these conditions it does no harm to try to indicate at the beginning that you understand what is going on in your own specialized area. For that reason, many conference abstracts contain one or two carefully selected references to recent literature. They are called *citations* (do not confuse them with *quotations*, which are always placed in quotation marks “... “).

In this way, authors can communicate that they are in touch with the latest developments.

• **Task 4**

Your research advisor contacts you about an upcoming regional conference and suggests that you submit a conference abstract based on your current work. The deadline is ten days away. The abstracts should be anonymous and contain between 150 and 200 words. Make sure you have a draft ready for your next academic writing class.

• **Task 5**

Based on your abstract, prepare a short presentation for your group mates. Be ready for their evaluations and think of your evaluation when listening to your peers' presentations.



IV. CHECKLIST

1. Your *research paper abstracts* do not exceed 10 full sentences.
2. You use full sentences, past tense, and impersonal passive.
3. You try to avoid negatives, abbreviations, jargon, symbols and other language ‘shortcuts’ that might lead to confusion.
4. Your *conference abstracts* are of the length required by the conference review panel.
5. To show that you are in touch with the latest developments in your field, you include some references to recent literature.