

Writing an Abstract

An abstract is a summary of a research paper, article, thesis or essay.

An abstract gives the reader a possibility to have a quick overview of the research presented in your text without reading the whole thing. Since an abstract is short (usually around 200-300 words) it can be difficult to compress all the relevant information into so little text.

The text below is meant as a rough guide and some tips on how to write an abstract.

Remember that most people will only read the abstract of your paper, and then move on. This means that it is a very important document in which to present your work and your style of writing, in order to attract readers.

What's in an Abstract?

Since an abstract is meant to contain all of your paper in just a few lines, you should consider which the most important aspects are. These can differ, but usually include:

- Purpose: What are you trying to achieve with your studies?
- Relevance: Why is this important to study?
- Methods: How did you study this phenomenon?
- Results: What did you find?
- Effects: How are these results important?

General Tips

Ironically, your writing of an abstract is a little bit like me writing these instructions. First I will give you a shorter, summarized version of what I think you should do (my abstract, so to speak) and then develop this summary to a more detailed text (my paper).

Here are some general tips (my abstract):

When writing an abstract, you should remember to always write the abstract last if possible. Furthermore, your text should be self-contained, clear, concise, specific and accurate. One way of accomplishing this is to use signals.

Write the abstract last

This might sound like redundant advice, but many students fail to recognize the importance of this. When writing to submit a paper, you should always write the abstract as the last thing you do, since otherwise you are not going to be sure what your results will be, and risk having to re-write it several times.

Of course, when you are presenting your work at a conference and need to submit an abstract in advance, your research might not be finished. Should this happen, you always have much of the information that you need for an abstract, you know the problem, purpose, methods and such, and in this case you write about what you *do* know, and what your aim is with the paper or research.

Be self-contained

Your reader only has your abstract to explain your work and very little patience as regards to looking things up. Remember to define all acronyms and abbreviations (except standard units of measurement and commonly used abbreviations), to spell out names of tests and drugs (using generic names for drugs), defining unique terms or terms that might not be self-explanatory.

Be clear, concise and specific

Since you have little space, each sentence needs to be as informative as possible, do not use twelve words when five will do. Furthermore, as you need to grab attention quickly, the lead sentence is the most important one and should be as informative as possible. Remember: the longer you go on, the greater the risk that your reader will lose interest. It should be natural to avoid sentences that contain no real information, but since many authors are sadly used to filling out the pages, this is more difficult than one can imagine.

Here are some further tricks to shorten a text you find too long:

- use digits for numbers (unless the number begins a sentence)
- abbreviate whenever possible (e.g., *vs.* for *versus*)
- give a percentage rather than exact data when possible and suitable
- don't waste space by repeating the title

However, remember not to go overboard with the shortening of sentences. You are always running the risk of comprising sentences to the point that it becomes difficult to understand the given information.

Be accurate

It is important to be accurate when writing your abstract, as failure to give a true picture of your paper might dissuade other researchers or students from reading your paper, or future papers you write. Make sure you use the same language, key words and concepts as you use in the paper, varying yourself on this point can confuse the reader. You should only give information that actually appears in your paper. Naturally, this includes the purpose and methods you have used. Finally, your abstract reflects the body of information in the text, but does not argue, comment or reference around it.

Also remember that if your paper emphasized a certain point, then so should your abstract, and if your paper gives equal space to three different aspects, this should be similarly reflected in your abstract.

Use signals

One efficient way of writing a compressed abstract that quickly and effectively conveys the message is to use signals, words and phrases such as:

Your problem/question: *This paper asks if ...*

(Instead of: The question that this paper wants to answer...)

Your method: *We used...*

(Instead of: The methods employed in this research...)

Your results: *I found that...*

(Instead of: The following three aspects were discovered...)

Furthermore, using transitional words and phrases is a good way to connect sentences and explain logic relations within a paragraph:

Causality: Thus, Therefore, in other words, in conclusion

Contrast: However, nevertheless, unlike

Addition: In addition, furthermore, moreover

Comparison: Similarly, by comparison, equally