

HOW TO WRITE AN ABSTRACT

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WHAT AN ABSTRACT IS: An abstract is a summary of your research.

WHAT AN ABSTRACT DOES: An abstract informs the reader what your project is about, and allows the reader to decide whether or not to read on.

WHAT AN ABSTRACT IS NOT: An abstract is not a proposal for research. A proposal is done before research is done, and solicits feedback.

WHEN AN ABSTRACT IS WRITTEN: An abstract is written after the research has taken place. It is written after the other sections of your paper have already been written.

WHERE AN ABSTRACT IS PLACED: An abstract is at the beginning of the project.

FOR WHOM THE ABSTRACT IS WRITTEN: An abstract is written for the reader. The level, tone, and emphasis must be determined by background and needs of the reader.

THE MAJOR CHALLENGE OF AN ABSTRACT: Abstracts must be thorough, but they must be short: usually under 250 words.

THE PROPER TONE FOR AN ABSTRACT: The tone should match that of the paper. For scientific articles, the goal is to be objective rather than evaluative. Strive for a precise rather than an evocative tone. Avoid passive phrasing, such as "it has been shown" or "it is widely believed."

THE PROPER TENSE FOR AN ABSTRACT: Since an abstract summarizes research that has already been done, an abstract should be written in the past tense. If the research has not yet been done, an abstract should honestly admit this and refer to the results in future tense. However, no such article would be accepted for a journal publication, and would be unlikely to be accepted for presentation at most conferences.

THE LEVEL AT WHICH AN ABSTRACT IS TO BE WRITTEN: The level is to be formal. Proper punctuation (e.g., the apostrophe) and noun/pronoun agreement are important because they convey precision. Avoid first person pronouns: "I, me, my, mine." Choose words carefully, using the appropriate terminology for your discipline.

WHAT SHOULD BE INCLUDED: Try to answer these questions.

Why did you do this study or project? This can be phrased as a research question or hypothesis. This may also review previous research and/or theories on this topic.

What did you do and how? This should be a description of your methodology: participants, apparatus for gathering data, techniques for data analysis.

What did you find out? These would be the results of your original research, including descriptive measures of how your sample scored on variables. Inferential statistics can be presented on major hypotheses tested by your research.

What do your findings mean? This discussion can speculate about causal analysis, theoretical implications, limitations of your study, and suggestions for future research.

WHAT AN ABSTRACT SHOULD NOT INCLUDE: Information and theories not covered in one of the sections of the full paper should not be mentioned in the abstract.

THE ORDERING OF POINTS WITHIN THE ABSTRACT: In general, use the same order as your paper (e.g., introduction, hypothesis, methods, results, discussion).

THE FORMAT FOR AN ABSTRACT: The abstract should be written as only one paragraph with no indentation.

KEY WORDS: At the bottom of the abstract list up to half a dozen terms which would be useful in indexing and categorizing your research.

THE BEST GUIDELINES FOR WRITING AN ABSTRACT: Get guidelines from your reader(s). If the paper is for a class, follow the guidelines of your professor. If it is for a journal article, follow the guidelines of the editor. If it is for a conference presentation, follow the guidelines provided by the conference.

HOW TO WRITE AN ABSTRACT: Good writing is the result of rewriting. This is especially true for the abstract. Write it, get feedback, then rewrite; repeat this cycle.