

PREPARING AN ABSTRACT FOR A CONFERENCE OR SEMINAR PRESENTATION

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What is an abstract?

It is a short, self-contained yet comprehensive synopsis of what you intend to share with your audience. This condensed version of your paper encapsulates its most significant features or as Belcher (2009:55) states it is the “distillation of the most important information”. You write the abstract yourself and submit it to the organising committee for consideration. In a conference programme, the abstracts are arranged in alphabetical order according to the authors’ surnames and, at times, appear with a brief bio-statement – a short personal profile.

Purpose of an abstract

An abstract provides the focus of your article or presentation. Other students and scholars can scan it quickly and get a sense of whether your work interests them sufficiently to attend your presentation. If it has been written to provoke discussion, even better.

Content of an abstract

An abstract must be a concise yet accurate summary of your presentation, and contain no unnecessary sentences or explanations. The title must be short and easily understood. The abstract puts forward the argument and explanation of your presentation and should be coherent. It consists of:

- ✓ Background information or the context of the study: What is study about?
- ✓ The rationale for the study: Why did you embark on the project? What is the current gap or debate in your field?
- ✓ Clear objectives or a project statement: What do you hope to accomplish? What is the problem under investigation?
- ✓ The literature summarised in one sentence.
- ✓ A brief description of the design and methodology of your project: How did you go about the project? Who was involved?
- ✓ Findings/results: What did you discover?
- ✓ Implications or significance of your study: Does the reader now know how your argument panned out? Can you now comment on previous research?
- ✓ Recommendations (optional).

Do not include information which requires someone to read the article in order to grasp what is meant. Do not repeat the title. The abstract must be dense with information. When submitting an abstract for a conference, make sure that it has been written to match the presentation category, or conference theme. The originality of your work ought to attract interested colleagues.

Format of an abstract

It is most important to adhere to the conference-specific instructions or those provided by the organisers. Generally, an abstract is a single paragraph in block format. On average, you are required to provide 150 - 250 words carefully crafted into 7 – 12 sentences. It is not good practice to exceed the word limit. As a rule, abstracts do not include citations, footnotes, figures/tables or keywords; but the format could be discipline or conference-specific. Technical jargon and abbreviations should be explained or omitted. Abstracts written as part of a dissertation or a thesis are much longer and slightly more detailed so you need to pare down what you used elsewhere.

Although the use of the first person singular or plural (I/we) is encouraged when reporting on your study, it is uncommon to use the active voice in an abstract. Usually it is also written in the present tense although the past tense is used to describe specific variables or outcomes that were measured. Sometimes you may have to provide a translation of the abstract if multiple conference languages are permitted. And finally, after spending so much time preparing a concise abstract, ensure that you meet the deadline for submission!

Sources consulted

American Psychological Association (2011). *Publication manual of the American Psychological Association*. 6th edition. American Psychological Association: Washington DC.

Belcher WL. (2009). *Writing your journal article in 12 weeks: a guide to academic publishing success*. SAGE Publications: Thousand Oaks, Calif.

Lester, JD and Lester JD jnr. (2005). *Writing research papers: a complete guide*. 11th edition. Pearson Education: New York.