

How to Write an Abstract

This document provides a simple guide to preparing an abstract. Many will know, but this is meant to help or provide assistance to those who may require guidance.

Most academic or scholarly journals and conferences (as well as a wide range of other publications and grant applications) require the writer to provide an abstract of their paper/presentation. This is arguably the most important section and often it is all that most of the audience will ever read. Here we refer to abstracts for papers, but these also apply to abstracts for conference papers or presentations.

What is an Abstract?

The abstract is a short summary of the paper – usually 100-200 words long and without references¹ - that should be able to stand separately from the paper. Some disciplines have expected requirements of the abstract; for example, in clinical journals abstracts are often required be split into short sections such as Background, Objective, Method, Results and Conclusion. Usually, the only requirement is that there is one paragraph of text.

An abstract isn't just an introduction to the paper or a teaser to attract readers. It is a summary of the whole paper/presentation. Remember that many people will never read more than the abstract, so you should make sure that your main argument is clearly included.

Writing the Abstract

It takes skill and planning to distil the main points of your paper into 200 words. One way to approach it is to 'borrow' the headings from a clinical journal mentioned above and try and write one sentence that sums up each of these points for your paper. You want to give enough Background that the reader (or editor, reviewer or grant assessor) knows the field you are working on, and the premise you are starting from. The Objective should be clear – what is this paper for and why did you write it (or do the work that led to its writing) in the first place. While methods and results sections are more applicable to scientific papers, reasons and arguments are explored using different frameworks in all papers, and these should be described briefly. Finally the main conclusions should be stated, with implications that may be drawn from the results or conclusions.

Be careful not to replicate text from your paper, and especially not from the start of the introduction. Those readers and reviewers that go on to read the full text may be put off. It is important to be clear and concise and, given the importance of this short section of text, ensure that it accurately sums up the paper and ensures that the article has the highest chance of publication, readers and subsequent citations.

¹ Different journals and conferences have different requirements – be sure that your abstract complies with the individual guidelines.