

Abstracts

An **Abstract** is basically a brief summary which outlines key information and content areas of a longer work, typically appearing as a separate section at the beginning of the work. Abstracts are a common feature of academic research articles, but are also included in research proposals, conference proposals, M.A. theses, and Ph.D. dissertations. The following is an overview of the standard components and requirements for abstracts:

Typical Content

Abstracts will vary in terms of in length and content from one academic discipline or writing project to another; but generally speaking most abstracts will contain information focusing on the following aspects of the research (usually just one or two statements for each area):

PURPOSE & BACKGROUND

- To provide a context for the research: Why was this particular focus area selected?
- Why it is the important?
- Why should the target audience be interested in the research?

PROBLEM & MOTIVATION

- What problem does the research try to solve? What questions does it try to answer?
- What “gap” in the previous research does this new research attempt to fill?
- What is the main argument, thesis, or claim of the research paper?

METHODOLOGY

- What was actually done to get the results of the research? For example, *qualitative* research might involve interviews with individual subjects; *quantitative* research might use surveys to gather data.
- Which research models or approaches were used? How was the data analyzed?

RESULTS (RESEARCH FINDINGS)

- What are the results of the research? What kind of information/data did it produce?
- Abstracts for scientific papers may include specific data results; other types of abstracts may offer more general findings.

IMPLICATIONS

- How do the research findings add to current knowledge on the topic?
- What the practical or theoretical applications of the findings? How can it be used?
- What are the implications of this new information for future research?

Types of Abstracts

There are three types of abstracts:

- Informative
- Descriptive
- Critical

INFORMATIVE ABSTRACTS

- The most common type of abstract
- Informative abstracts summarize all key arguments and conclusions of the research paper including the *purpose*, *methods*, and *scope* of the research, as well as the *results*, *conclusions*, and *recommendations* of the researcher
- The length may range from 250 words to a page or more

DESCRIPTIVE ABSTRACTS

- Less common than informative abstracts
- These abstracts provide a more general description of the research paper
- Descriptive abstracts focus on the purpose, goal, and methods of the research but leave out the results section
- These are usually short (100-200 words).

CRITICAL ABSTRACTS

- These types of abstracts are rare.
- They contain the same basic information as other types of abstracts but also offer a critique of the research in terms of design and methods

NOTE:

Abstracts that are written as a requirement for *research proposals* do not need to include *research results* or *conclusions*, since the research has not yet been done, only proposed.

Standard Format

Abstracts are typically formatted as a single paragraph that appears at the beginning of a research paper. Longer abstracts may be organized into short paragraphs focusing on specific components and information.

The IWC QUICK GUIDE to Abstracts

- Rules regarding font size and style are the same as for standard academic/research writing.
- Length Requirements may vary according to the type of abstract being written (see *Types of Abstracts*, page opposite) or the requirements of the academic department or the publisher.
- Abstracts usually include a separate list of “key words” at the bottom. These words represent key terms associated with the research and are designed to help researchers locate the paper in an online search.

NOTE: As with any type or genre of writing, becoming familiar with abstracts is a good way to prepare for writing one. We recommend that writers study the abstracts of papers related to their own field of academic or professional interest; and analyze them in terms of format, content, and writing style.

Suggested Strategies

Although they appear at the beginning of the paper, abstracts are generally written last, when all the research has been completed, the results have been analyzed, and the research paper has been written.

The crucial requirement for all abstracts is that they use clear, concise language to efficiently summarize the essential components, ideas, and information in the research paper. The key is in identifying which information to include and which information is not needed. The following are some techniques that writers use to create abstracts:

Reverse Outlining

Keeping in mind that research papers are generally divided into a series of sections focusing on different aspects of the research (i.e. purpose, methods, results, implications, etc.) this technique involves writing down the main idea of each paragraph in each section and then summarizing the main ideas of each section into one or two statements highlighting the essential information. These can then be combined and revised to form an abstract.

Cut & Paste

Another technique involves reading through the entire paper and cutting-pasting sentences that best describe key information or sections.

Certain sentences such as the thesis statement, research questions, and the topic sentences of paragraphs or sections should immediately stand out. Once these sentences have been collected they can be revised and paraphrased to form a unified paragraph (i.e. the abstract).

Identify Key terms

Another way of identifying information that best describes the research and its outcomes is by scanning through the entire document to find terms (words associated specifically with the research topic and/or academic discipline) and phrases that represent core aspects of the research paper (purpose, scope, methods, findings, etc.). These terms and phrases can then be incorporated into a paraphrased summary of the work.

REMEMBER:

The abstract is a reflection of the author’s abilities to communicate key information in a way that is clear, informative, and interesting for the audience.

Often it is the only part of a research paper that is read before a reader decides to either look more closely at the contents or ignore it.

As such, it is important to do it properly. This often means a lot of editing and revising to produce an abstract that is well-written and error-free, and which meets all standard requirements.

Bibliography

The following works were consulted in the making of this IWC Quick Guide:

Carroll, Leah, “How to Write an Abstract: Tips and Samples”

The Writing Center at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, “Abstracts Examples”

The Writing Center at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, “Abstracts”

University of Melbourne, “Writing an Abstract: Understanding and Developing Abstracts”

Wikihow.com, “How to Write an Abstract”