

Writing Successful Conference Abstracts

- 1) Model your abstract on examples from the discipline. Find examples of abstracts from your particular discipline and model your writing on that example. You have to try to appeal to a specific audience that expects a certain format and vocabulary. So depending on the audience, avoid or use jargon.
- 2) Check requirements: abstract length, content (“Call for Papers”), submission material (bio, cover page, institutional affiliation, whether or not to submit by email...)

Abstracts should contain the following information:

The majority of abstracts are informative. While they still do not critique or evaluate a work, they do more than describe it. A good informative abstract acts as a surrogate for the work itself. That is, the writer presents and explains all the main arguments and the important results and evidence in the complete article/paper/book. An informative abstract includes the information that can be found in a descriptive abstract (purpose, methods, scope) but also includes the results and conclusions of the research and the recommendations of the author. The length varies according to discipline, but an informative abstract is rarely more than 10% of the length of the entire work. In the case of a longer work, it may be much less.

⇒ Notice that this paragraph is written as an abstract.

Despite the fact that an abstract is quite brief, it must do almost as much work as the multi-page paper that follows it. This means that it should in most cases include the following sections. Each section is typically a single sentence, although there is room for creativity. In particular, the parts may be merged or spread among a set of sentences. Use the following as a checklist for your next abstract:

- **Motivation:** Why do we care about the issue? This section should include the importance of your work, the difficulty of the area, and the impact it might have if successful. For a conference paper, you could, for example, make reference to the topic of the panel for which you have written the abstract.
- **Problem statement:** What is the main argument of your paper? Be careful not to use too much jargon. In some cases it is appropriate to put the problem statement before the motivation, but usually this only works if most readers already understand why the topic/ problem is important.
- **Methodology:** Describe your interpretative angle or the types of evidence used in your research. Mention key concepts, key terms, names, and make clear which aspects you will focus on (gender, environment, class, race etc.).
- **Results:** What will you conclude? Foreshadow the outcome of your discussion. What is the point of your paper? Avoid vague, hand-waving results such as “very,” “small,” or “significant.”
- **Implications:** What are the implications of your answer? How does this work add to the body of knowledge on the topic?

All abstracts include:

1. The full citation of the source preceding the abstract.

2. The most important information first.
3. The same level of language found in the original, including technical language.
4. Key words and phrases that quickly identify the content and focus of the work.
5. Clear, concise, and powerful language.

Abstracts may include:

1. The thesis of the work in the first sentence.
2. The background that places the work in the larger body of literature.
3. The same chronological structure of the original work.

How not to write a abstract:

1. Do not refer extensively to other works.
2. Do not add information not contained in the original work.
3. Do not define terms.

Other Considerations

An abstract must be a fully self-contained, capsule description of the paper. It can't assume (or attempt to provoke) the reader to look for an explanation of what is meant by some vague statement. It must make sense all by itself. Some points to consider include:

- Meet the word count limitation. If your abstract runs too long, either it will be rejected or your reader will whittle it down him- or herself to meet the word limit. Your purposes will be better served by doing the difficult task of cutting yourself, rather than leaving it to someone else who might be more interested in meeting size restrictions than in representing your efforts in the best possible manner. An abstract word limit of 200-300 words is common.
- Neither your abstract nor your paper may sound opinionated!!
- Think of a half-dozen search phrases and keywords that people looking for your work might use. Be sure that those exact phrases appear in your abstract, so that they will turn up at the top of a search result listing.