

How to Write Abstract

A condensed version of how to write an abstract was presented on the inside front and back covers of AU J.T. 8(1): July 2004 under the heading “How to Write the Titles, By-Line(s), Abstract and Keywords of Scientific Papers”. As many potential authors still have some difficulties in preparing the abstracts of their papers, the Editor decided to give detailed instruction on how to write abstracts of scientific and academic papers with the hope that this will aid authors.

What is an abstract?

An abstract is *a brief, accurate, and comprehensive summary of the contents of the article without added interpretation or criticism*. It allows readers to survey the contents of the article which follows quickly. In preparing the abstract, it is important to keep the sentences short and simple by covering with just one topic each and excluding irrelevant information. Nevertheless, an abstract should be informative by presenting the quantitative and/or qualitative information contained in the document.

What are the functions of an abstract?

An abstract has two functions, viz.:

1. Placed at the beginning of the article, it helps readers to know the brief content of the article, thus saving them time to read through the whole paper. Readers normally have their first contact with an article by seeing just the abstract and deciding on the basis of the abstract whether to read the entire article. Thus, an abstract must be informative and readable; it should be well organized, concise, and self-contained.

2. It is used by abstracting and information services to index and retrieve articles. Abstract journals can directly publish an abstract as it is, thus facilitating the publication of the article which has been published in the primary publication in Abstract Journal faster and more accurate.

Characteristics of a good abstract

A good abstract should be:

1. Accurate: An abstract should reflect correctly the objectives and contents of the article. Do not include information that does not appear in the body of the article in the abstract. If the investigation extends or replicates previous research, it must be recorded in the abstract, with a brief citation of the author (initials and family name) and year. It is suggested that the author compare the abstract with the outline of the article’s headings in order to verify the accuracy of the abstract.

2. Self-contained: Define all unique terms, abbreviations (except units of measurement), and acronyms in the abstract. Include names of the authors (initials and family name) and dates of publication in citations of other publications (and give a full citation in the list of references). If the article does not have a separate Keywords section, embed them in the abstract as this will enhance the readers’ ability to find them; this will also help in indexing.

3. Concise and specific: Each sentence should be as informative as possible, especially the lead sentence. Make it brief. The total length of the abstract should not exceed 120 words, in one

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paragraph, if possible. Begin the abstract with the most important information but do not repeat the title. It may include the purpose of the investigation, the results and conclusions, or whatever is the most important to inform the readers.

4. Coherent and readable: Write clearly. Here are some suggestions as to write clearly:

- Use verbs rather than the noun equivalents.
- Use the active rather than the passive voice, but without personal pronouns (I or we).
- Use the present tense to describe results without continuing applicability or conclusions drawn.
- Use the past tense to describe specific variables manipulated or tests applied.
- Use the third rather than the first person.

Some suggestions for preparing an abstract

After finishing the whole content, the author should re-read the article and note down salient points, including the nature of the problems, objectives, methods, results, conclusions and suggestions for further investigation. Then combine them into the *abstract* later. Do not put anything which was not present in the text, or repeat the title. The objectives and methods, or the nature of the study should be briefly presented. For new methods, there should be the principle of practice, and the scope of accuracy. Do not cite any references, figures, or tables in the *abstract*. Accentuate newly discovered organisms or compounds. If there is a need to cite references, the sources should be provided in bracket in the abstract. There should be no list of references in the abstract. The *abstract* not to exceed 200 words or 3% of the article contents.

Hint to write an abstract

- Describe the main findings concisely and summarize the conclusions.
- Include all the main information covered in the paper.
- Write with a non-specialist style in mind.
- Different points should be emphasized proportionally with that of the main body of the paper.
- For short articles, the abstract should be written as a single paragraph;
- For long articles, split the abstract into two or more paragraphs if this is clearer for the readers.
- Use past tense for what was found.
- Include as much as possible the key words from the text in the abstract.
- Avoid unfamiliar terms, acronyms, abbreviations, or symbols; or define them if there is no choice.
- Use generic name, not trade names, for chemicals and drugs.
- Identify organisms by their scientific names.
- Do not include tables, diagrams, equations, or structural formulae in the abstract.
- Avoid citing references unless the reference inspired the author to investigate further.
- Use numerals for all numbers, except those that begins a sentence. It is suggested that authors recast sentences that begin with a number.
- Abbreviate liberally. However, the abbreviations that need to be explained in the text must also be explained on first use in the text not only in the abstract.