How to Write a Successful Abstract

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Abstract writing is a crucial skill for scholars, and one that needs to be developed. An abstract gives you only a few hundred words in which to convince someone that your research is of interest, and that you are a serious, rigorous scholar; it is therefore crucial that your abstract is convincing and compelling. It is not something to be dashed off at the last minute, but rather must be honed so that it contains all the information needed for the recipient to make a judgment on you and your work, and for that judgment to be a firm YES rather than a flat NO.

So let's start with the basic questions, and how to avoid the pitfalls into which far too many scholars fall, and that even includes experienced faculty members. At the end you will find a list of references which will help you to apply this general advice to specific disciplines.

What is a descriptive abstract?
A descriptive abstract is the summary of work you have already completed or work you are proposing. It is *not* the same thing as the introduction to your work. The abstract should give readers a short, concise snapshot of the work *as a whole*—not just how it starts. Remember that the readers of your abstract will rarely see the paper as a whole, so in this short document you need to give them an overall picture of your work. If you are writing an abstract as a proposal for your research – in other words, as a request for permission to write a paper – the abstract serves to predict the kind of paper you hope to write.

What is different about a conference paper (or informative) abstract?
A conference abstract is one you submit to have your paper considered for presentation at a professional conference. Its length will be specified by the conference organizer but will rarely be more than 200 - 300 words In an ideal world, it is written *after* the actual paper is completed, but in some cases you will write an abstract for a paper you haven't yet written— especially if the conference is some time away. Because the conference review committee will usually read the abstract and not your actual paper, you need to think of it as an independent document, aimed at that specific committee and connecting solidly with the theme of the conference (you may want to pick up phrasing from the conference title or call for papers in the abstract to reinforce this connection).

Examine the call for papers carefully: it will specify the length of the abstract, special formatting requirements, whether the abstract will be published in the conference bulletin or proceedings, and so on. Abstracts that do not meet the specified format are usually rejected early in the proceedings, so pay attention to the rules of each conference!

How wedded are you to the abstract you submit?
An abstract is a promissory note. That is, you are promising that you can and will produce the goods in the paper. Particularly in the case of a conference abstract, the organizers will theme their sessions based on the contents of the abstracts. If you propose a paper that says you will use Foucault to comment on post-colonialism in *Heat and Dust*, and then show up with a paper

on "Metaphors for Spring in *A Bend in the River*," your paper may not fit the session where it was slotted, and you will look silly—and those organizers may not ask you back. While some divergence from the promised topic is acceptable (and probably inevitable if you haven't written the paper when you submit the abstract), you need to produce a paper that is within shouting distance of your original topic, for the sake of keeping your promise.

Choosing your Title
The title should be informative and focused, indicating the problem and your general approach. It is very fashionable in the humanities to have titles featuring "post-colonic surge"—a catchy phrase, a colon, and then an explanation of the title. While snappy titles may help your abstract be noticed, it is really what comes after the colon that sells the abstract, so pay attention to it. "All the World's a Ship: Race and Ethnicity in *Moby Dick*" catches the eye, but "Melville's Deconstruction of Ethnicity in the 'Midnight, Forecastle' Episode of *Moby Dick*" tells readers much more specifically what you're promising to deliver.

Length, Contents, and Organization
Descriptive abstracts are usually only 100-250 words, so they must be pared down to the essentials. Typically, a descriptive abstract answers these questions:

- *Why did you choose this study or project?*
- *What did/will you do and how?*
- *Where does this sit within the existing literature/theoretical frameworks*
- *What did you/do you hope to find?*
- *What do your findings mean?* (for a completed work)

Bear in mind that you should:

- *avoid repeating or rephrasing your title* in the body of the abstract; usually it is already provided in the heading, and you will need to maximize the limited word count for new information.

- *outline* your original premise, as well as your goals, approach and main findings

- *keep bibliographic references to a minimum* and embed the information in the text; short abstracts don't have references or footnotes. Any crucial texts or authorities should be named, but do not give page numbers.

The abstract should begin with a clear sense of the research question you have framed (and, if the work is completed, with your thesis). Often this is set up as a problem/solution strategy:

> "Although some recent scholars claim to have identified Shakespeare's lost play *Cardenio*, that attribution is still not accepted. In this paper I use the records of the Worshipful Company of Stationers, London's chief publishing organization, to show that the play identified by Charles Hamilton in 1990 is not actually the play Shakespeare's company mounted in 1613."

It always helps when you identify the theoretical or methodological school that you are using to approach your question or position yourself within an ongoing debate. This helps readers

situate your ideas in the larger conversations of your discipline. For instance, "The debate among Folsom, McGann, and Stallybrass over the notion of database as a genre (*PMLA* 122.5, Fall 2007) suggests that…." or "Using the definition of dataclouds proposed by Johnson-Eilola (2005), I will argue that…"

Finally, briefly state your conclusion. "Through analyzing Dickinson's use of metaphor, I demonstrate that she systematically transformed Watt's hymnal tropes as a way of asserting her own doctrinal truths. This transformation…"

There is an ongoing debate about how much jargon should be included in an abstract. My best advice is to add any technical terms you need, but don't put in jargon for jargon's sake or just to make it look like you are an expert (this especially extends to (post)modernizing your words or other typographical carbuncles).

Conference Abstracts

A conference paper abstract should adhere to the basic requirements of the descriptive abstract, but should also state clearly how the proposed paper fits in the theme of the conference. For instance, a call for papers for a session on "Science and Literature in the 19th Century" at a conference entitled "(Dis)Junctions" requested "critical works on the interaction between scientific writing and literature in the 19th century: how did scientific discoveries, theories and assumptions (for example, in medicine and psychology, but not limited to these) influence contemporaneous fiction?" If you were submitting a paper to this session, you would want to have a sentence or two about the theories you were discussing and name the particular works where you would identify their influence.

If you can work the words "join" or "junction" (or "disjunction") into your title or abstract, you will increase your chance of having the paper accepted, since you're showing clearly how the paper fits the theme of the session. Concluding your abstract with a pithy phrase that relates back to the conference theme is also a good plan.

 Length It is very important that you check the time allotted to each paper (usually 20 minutes, with 10 minutes for questions, but this can vary) so you know what you can offer in your paper, and therefore your abstract. You will not have time to make more than three main points in this time, so your abstract should not be so detailed as to frighten the conference organizers

Practical requirements Organizers appreciate your specifying that "this paper can be given in X minutes" and will also need to know if you need any special technology to present the paper so, having written your abstract, you can add a separate sentence below under 'technical requirements,' such as "This paper can be presented in 20 minutes and requires the technology to show brief film clips on DVD." This is a much-appreciated professional touch, and will also avoid catastrophes such as your paper being stopped in its tracks on the day, because you hadn't specified you would need a stable internet feed to show that YouTube video that was crucial to your argument.

Further resources, from which I drew some of this material, are specific to certain disciplines and can be found on the following sites:

www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/**abstracts**.html
www.linguistics.ucsb.edu/faculty/bucholtz/sociocultural/**abstract**tips.html
www.academic-**conference**s.org/**abstract**-guidelines.htm
http://ceca.icom.museum/_dbase_upl/**writing**an**abstract**.pdf
http://ling.wisc.edu/~macaulay/800.abstracts.html
http://writingcenter.unlv.edu/writing/abstract.html
http://www.lightbluetouchpaper.org/2007/03/14/how-not-to-write-an-abstract/
http://webapp.comcol.umass.edu/msc/absGuidelines.aspx