

How to Write an Abstract

What is an abstract?

An abstract is an original, concise summary of a research study or project.

- The most important single paragraph in a piece of work
- An overview of the facts:
 - Summary of ideas
 - Brief overview of work
 - Short summary of a project
 - Self-contained statement
- Often written last

What is the purpose of an abstract?

- It summarises the problem investigated, the research findings, the major findings, and the implications of the findings
- It enables the reviewer to make an informed decision about a proposed conference presentation or poster

Why should I learn how to write an abstract?

You will know how to:

- Present complex information in a clear, concise way
- Read abstracts more effectively
- Strengthen your participation in research projects
- Prepare abstracts for meetings
- Condense information for reports

Cited reasons why nurses do not write and submit abstracts:

- Fear of rejection
- Fear of public criticism
- Lack of motivation
- Time issues
- Lack of knowledge of how to write abstracts
- Lack of confidence
- Lack of support/mentors

Where are abstracts submitted?

- Conferences
 - Podium presentations
 - Poster presentations
- Publications
 - Peer-reviewed
 - Journals
- Organizations that provide grants/funding⁴

Help! Where do I start?

- Decide on the conference, publication, etc., where you would like to present your work
- Locate the organisation's guidelines and read them carefully⁴
- Most guidelines pertain to technical requirements, such as:
 - Word count/length
 - Font sizes

- Content/sections
- Key words
- Use of tables or figures
- English language in writing and presenting

Key components of an abstract (can vary across disciplines):

- Title
- Author/s
- Introduction
 - Background/rationale
 - Scope, objectives, purpose
- Methods, design and sample
 - How the problem was studied or addressed
 - What research practices were used (this can vary considerably from field to field)
- Findings/results
 - Principle findings, what indicates success or suggests a re-think/ revised methods (metrics)
- Interpretation, implications and conclusions

Title

Your abstract title should:

- Accurately describe your story
- Include key elements describing the content

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- If it is a research based abstract, possibly indicate the design of the study
- Include key words that answer what, who, and why
- Command attention
- Be simple
 - A punchy title may be amusing, but it may not clearly communicate the content of the presentation/poster^{3 4}

Author/s

- Include everyone who is involved, from the most active participant to the least
- List the presenting author first
- Include affiliations (relevant to the project) and contact information
- All authors must approve the abstract and give permission to submit it
- Disclosures may be included here, if requested³

Introduction: Background / rationale

- One or two simple opening sentences that describe why the problem/issue is important
- Specifically define the health problem or concern; avoid a global statement⁴

Introduction: Scope, objectives, purpose

- Reason for the research or project
- What is it about?
- Why is it interesting?
- Why is it important?
- What are the outcome measures?^{1 4}

Methods, design and sample

- One or two sentences that tell the reviewer how the research was done and what to expect in the results⁴
- Research design
 - Examples: prospective or retrospective, randomized clinical trial, observational, repeated measures
- Sample size and descriptors
 - Examples: gender, age, diagnosis, place of residence

Findings / results

- State your findings
- Describe study results with actual numbers and percentages
- Use descriptive statistics
- Include relevant data, primary outcomes, key secondary outcomes, and significant adverse events
- Include emerging ideas¹

Interpretation, implications and conclusions

- In two sentences, describe how your research made a difference in nursing practice or furthered the knowledge base (i.e., answer the “so what?” question)³
 - First sentence: concisely summarize the main findings
 - Second sentence: state the clinical implications (i.e., “Our study showed...”)
- Avoid broad claims; be specific and focused on your findings and what they mean
 - What is the take home message?
 - What can be concluded?⁴

Should I include tables and figures?

- Include a table or figure only if quickly and clearly communicates key information and is easily readable
- The table or figure should be appropriately sized for a small space and should be numbered with captions (usually at the top of a table)
- Include a key for any abbreviations

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- Place the table or figure where it falls in the text and include a reference to where it falls (e.g., "Information about <topic>, is shown in Figure 1 as an illustration of <topic>")⁶

The 5 "Cs" of abstract writing:

1. **Clarify** goals/objectives
2. **Complete** – covers the major part of the project
3. **Compose** abstract to be readable, well-organised, jargon-free, concise, cohesive with smooth transitions, and complete⁴
4. **Comply** with rules (i.e., length, word count, content/sections, order, keywords)
5. **Confirm**/review all processes (i.e., submission requirements, process/evaluation criteria, deadline)³

Tips for submitting a winning abstract:

- Compose the first draft with no consideration of word limit³
- Ensure the draft is reviewed by co-authors for completeness, logical flow, spelling and grammar, and correct font and size
- If possible, have someone not involved in writing the abstract proofread it for errors, flow, and clarity

- Manual proofreading should eliminate most grammatical errors, misspelled words and typographical errors
- Do not rely on software autocorrect programmes, such as Spell Check, to correct your errors
- Be as complete as you can in the smallest possible amount of space
 - Use short, clear sentences – one idea per sentence⁴
- Avoid jargon (e.g., "pushing fluids")
- Review guidelines/instructions on the use of product brand names; when in doubt use general descriptions of products
- Make sure the abstract addresses the conference theme

Some parting notes...

- Organisations provide clear instructions to authors on abstract formatting and contents; be sure to follow all structure guidelines
 - Review the requirements on what material can be presented
 - Include headings exactly as they are described
- Note the deadlines for submission (date and time – be aware of time zones)
- Start writing early and Revise, Revise, Revise
- Limit your abstract to the indicated word count and font sizes

- If desired, you can model the abstract of your presentation, sentence for sentence, on the abstract of an important paper on a similar subject with similar methodology³
- Remember to keep an electronic or written copy of your abstract, so that when it is accepted you can use it to start developing your presentation

Conclusion

A research or project abstract provides a summary of your work's value, innovation and excitement.⁶ Writing an excellent abstract is hard work, but worth it when it is accepted for presentation.

References

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