

Writing Your Abstract

An academic abstract is a self-contained, short, powerful statement that contains key words and describes a larger work. Components vary according to discipline. An abstract of a social science or scientific work may contain the scope, purpose, results, and contents of the work. An abstract of a humanities work may contain the thesis, background, and conclusion of the larger work.

When abstracting your own work, it may be difficult to condense a piece of writing that you have agonized over for weeks (or months, or even years) into a 250-word statement. Start by explaining your paper in the briefest terms to a friend who doesn't know about your topic and jot down what you say as your basic outline.

Since abstracts are the first impression of your document and indicates what to look for in your paper. The most useful abstracts should represent the quantitative and qualitative information in the document, and also reflect its reasoning. When preparing an abstract, consider the following key process elements:

Reason for writing: What is the importance of the paper and research? Why would a reader be interested in the larger work?

Problem: What problem does this work attempt to solve? What is the scope of the project? What is the main argument/thesis/claim?

Methodology: An abstract of a scientific work may include specific models or approaches used in the larger study. Other abstracts may describe the types of evidence used in the research.

Results: Again, an abstract of a scientific work may include specific data that indicates the results of the project. Other abstracts may discuss the findings in a more general way.

Implications: What changes should be implemented as a result of the findings of the work? How does this work add to the body of knowledge on the topic?

Typically, an informative abstract answers these questions in about 100-250 words:

- Why did you do this study or project? (reason & problem)
- What did you do, and how? (methodology)
- What did you find? (results)
- What do your findings mean? (implications)

If the paper is about a new method or apparatus the last two questions might be changed to

- What are the advantages (of the method or apparatus)? (results)
- How well does it work? (implications)

An abstract is read along with the title, so do not repeat or rephrase the title. It will likely be read without the rest of the document, however, so make it complete enough to stand on its own. Your readers expect you to summarize your conclusions as well as your purpose, methods, and main findings. Emphasize the different points in proportion to the emphasis they receive in the body of the document.

The abstract should only contain information that is in the document. Choose active verbs instead of passive when possible ("the study tested" rather than "it was tested by the study"). Avoid trade names, acronyms, abbreviations, or symbols if possible as you would need to explain them, and that takes too much room.

Adapted from: <http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/specific-types-of-writing/abstract/>;
<https://users.ece.cmu.edu/~koopman/essays/abstract.html>; <http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/abstracts/>

