

University of Houston Clear Lake

WRITING CENTER

Tips for Writing an Abstract

An **abstract** is a stand-alone document that briefly states the essential information of a paper, article, document, or book. The abstract should reveal the scope of the paper and topics discussed. Writing an abstract boils down the essence of a whole paper into a paragraph(s), which should be no more than 10% of the length of the original. (Review specific requirements for abstracts in APA or MLA documentation style books.) The abstract should be the last part written before a work is submitted. The abstract is like a mini paper/report. It answers the same questions as the paper/report itself:

- What was done?
- Why was it done?
- How was it done?
- What was found?
- What is the significance of the findings?

Suggestions for Writing an Abstract:

- Communicate a crucial piece of information in every sentence.
- Use active voice as much as possible.
- Avoid compacting information into noun strings and nominalizations.
- Omit lengthy examples, tables, and supporting details.
- Never include information that doesn't appear in your paper.
- Revise the draft into smooth, stand-alone prose; the abstract itself should be a mini-essay.

Types of Abstracts:

Informative abstracts:

This is the most common and useful abstract. This abstract gives the reader a sense of the major picture of a document without including the details. A sentence or two should be devoted to each major section of the paper. Sentences should cover the problem, hypothesis, method, results, and conclusions. Two hundred words is a good length for briefing the reader on each part of the document.

Indicative Abstracts:

The indicative abstract is a guide to the contents of an article but does not reveal what the contents are in any detail. The subject and scope of the original article and sometimes the method by which the problem was solved are included. The indicative abstract should cover the problem, its significance, possible solutions or hypotheses explaining it, and the methodology used to test a hypothesis or solution. Indicative abstracts make readers curious about the work by posing questions but withholding specific answers.

Descriptive Abstracts (Executive Summary):

A descriptive abstract presents a general view of your subject, scope, and/or conclusions and recommendations. A descriptive abstract is suitable for essays and technical reports intended for a general readership. A descriptive abstract would include a brief description of the subject, a complete report of the findings or conclusion, and some recommendations.

How do you write an abstract?

Writing an abstract involves boiling down the essence of a whole paper into a single paragraph. One way to write an effective abstract is to start with the complete draft and do the following:

1. Highlight the objective and the conclusions that are in the paper's introduction and discussion.
2. Bracket information in the methods section of the paper that contains keywords.
3. Highlight the results from the discussion or results section of the paper.
4. Compile the above highlighted and bracketed information into a single paragraph.
5. Condense the bracketed information into the key words and phrases that identify without explaining the methods used.
6. Delete any extra words and phrases.
7. Delete any background information.
8. Rephrase the first sentence so that it starts off with the new information contained in the paper, rather than the general topic. One way to do this is to begin the first sentence with the phrase "this paper" or "this study."
9. Revise the paragraph so that the abstract conveys the essential information.

Adapted from:

- Porush, David. *A Short Guide to Writing about Science*. New York: HarperCollins, 1995.
- The Writing Center at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute