



Writing an Abstract

An abstract is a brief summary of a scientific report or research paper. While searching databases, researchers read abstracts to decide whether the full papers are valuable. An effective abstract concisely communicates a paper's main ideas and serves as a signpost to interested readers. Because the abstract summarizes and highlights content found in the paper's major sections, the best time to write an abstract is late in the writing process.

What should an abstract include?

The abstract highlights the main information in a report, so you should have 1-2 sentences for each main section. You provide background and introduce the topic, state the research question, describe the primary method, report key results, and draw any significant conclusions. An abstract rarely includes literature reviewed and does not often engage in discussion of results.

How do I write the abstract?

First, read abstracts from journals in your field and abstracts from journals where you want to publish. The description provided above applies to most abstracts, but you will encounter a few variations. Some journals, such as *The Journal of Emergency Medicine*, call for [a structured approach using subheadings](#):

- Background
- Objectives
- Methods
- Results
- Conclusions

This approach, used in a variety of fields, makes writing the 200-250 word abstract highly organized and leaves nothing to chance. You communicate concisely under each subheading, usually 1-3 sentences.

Most other journals expect a similar format, just without the subheadings. You might try writing with the subheadings and then removing them. You should be left with 6-10 concise sentences like the sentences in [this abstract](#) from *Web Ecology*.

Finally, some journals prefer a results-driven approach. The author introduces the topic, may mention the research question, and then moves to results and interpretation. Notice the first three words of the second sentence in [this abstract](#) from *Science*: "We found that. . ." The authors are clearly discussing results. To write this type of abstract, use the bulleted list above but omit *Objectives* and *Methods*. Write a more concise abstract that focuses on what your study found and what it means.

How do I edit and polish the abstract?

Keep the abstract short, precise, and uncluttered. Avoid unfamiliar abbreviations and acronyms. Do not make in-text references to your sources. An abstract is sometimes separated from the rest of the paper for indexing, so you cannot assume a reader will have access to your bibliography. Do not use tables, figures, or illustrations, and avoid any long lists in the text.

Works Consulted

Davis, Martha. *Scientific Papers and Presentations*. San Diego: Academic Press, 2005. Print.

Swales, John M., and Christine B Feak. *Academic Writing for Graduate Students: Essential Tasks and Skills*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004. Print.