PHCRIS
Primary Health Care
Research & Information Service

Fact Sheet

Writing great abstracts

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Abstracts are powerful 'short stories' that are used in journal articles and conference presentations. An abstract will help reviewers to decide whether to accept your paper, conference abstract or grant application, and help readers to decide whether to read your paper or attend your presentation. Often people will read only the abstract of a paper (even if they cite it), so it is crucial that your abstract gets your message across. Thus, when it comes to writing abstracts, it is worth the effort to do this well. This fact sheet provides tips and information to assist you with this exercise.

What is an abstract?

An abstract is a short piece of writing that presents the essential elements of a larger work in a powerful manner. It is a standalone document, usually no more than 150 to 500 words. Abstracts are written for various reasons, the most common being for:

- Information – to assist readers to decide quickly whether they should read the entire paper (which they may have to purchase) or attend the conference presentation
- Selection – used by journal editors and conference scientific review committees to determine whether the work will be accepted for review or for a conference presentation
- Indexing – in online databases with search features.

Abstract structure and content

An abstract should tell readers what the issue is (background), why it warrants investigation or analysis (purpose), how you have done this (method), and what you have found and concluded (results and conclusions).

Sometimes abstracts are single paragraphs without any defined sections. Often, however, they are required to conform to a scientific structure with headings such as Aims, Methods, Results, Conclusion. For the National Primary Health Care Research Conference the specified structure is:

- **Title:** clearly but concisely explain what your work is about; include the main keywords but avoid using more than 12 words
- **Aims and Rationale:** put the work in context and explain why the research is important
- **Methods:** describe the study design, data collection and analysis methods in brief
- **Findings:** (the most important section) present the key findings, supported by relevant data (but not tables or graphs)
- **Potential uses of this research:** explain the significance and value of the findings, highlight take-home message(s) and implications for future.

It is generally best to have limited use of acronyms, abbreviations or symbols in the abstract. However, if you have to repeatedly write 'Commission on Social Determinants of Health' (for example), it might be appropriate to use the acronym 'CSDH' (after defining it).

Similarly, it is generally best not to cite any references. Occasionally, however, it might be appropriate to cite a publication (e.g., a World Health Organization report) that is the focus of your abstract.

Strong abstracts include concise and precise language, with a good match between title and content. They present a summary of actual results (instead of noting that 'results will be discussed'); and rather than focusing on background material, they emphasise findings of the research and their implications.

Abstracts attracting attention

An abstract that has a 'wow factor' will stand out because it makes an impact on the reader.

An abstract is read much more often than the rest of your work. To attract attention, it should provide succinct information to readers, so that if it interests them, they will continue reading.

An abstract written for submission to a conference should link to the conference theme wherever possible.

For an abstract to be useful in a searchable online database, it needs to incorporate the key terms that potential readers would use in their search, so that it will be identified in any relevant search process.

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Review, revise and check the guidelines before submitting your abstract

Given that abstracts have to be short, make every word count. Revising and reviewing your abstract helps to achieve this. When revising, delete any superfluous words and use strong, meaningful words that convey a clear message.

Keep in mind that you are writing for an audience who may have limited knowledge of your research. Ask a colleague who is not familiar with your work to review your abstract and provide constructive comments on ways to improve and clarify your abstract.

Proofread your abstract yourself. Many people find that it is helpful to print it and read it on paper rather than on-screen.

Check that you have followed the guidelines set by the journal or conference call for abstracts regarding the structure and word count of the abstract. Reviewers usually use criteria based on these guidelines to determine what will be accepted, so it makes sense to do as you have been instructed.

Abstracts are usually submitted online. Be aware that the submission process is not simply pasting an abstract into a box; you will need to allow plenty of time to login and enter your contact details and other required information. Proofread your abstract again shortly before you submit it.

Further reading

How to write a good abstract for a scientific paper or conference presentation.
Andrade C. (2011). Indian Journal of Psychiatry, 53(2), 172-175.

Quick tips for great abstracts.
Canadian Dermatology Association. (n.d.).
http://www.dermatology.ca/annual-conferences/conference-details/reminders-and-tips/quick-tips-for-great-abstracts/

Abstract art: How to write competitive conference and journal abstracts.
Ickes M J, Gambescia S F. (2011). Health Promotion Practice, 12(4), 493-496.

Preparing a structured abstract for a presentation at a scientific conference.
Macdonald R, Shaban R. (2007). Journal of Emergency Primary Health Care, 5(2), 990248.

How to write a paper or conference proposal abstract.
The Professor is in. (2011). Retrieved January 2014,
http://theprofessorisin.com/2011/07/12/how-tosday-how-to-write-a-paper-abstract/

Writing an abstract: Understanding and developing abstracts.
University of Melbourne. (n.d.) Retrieved January 2014,
http://services.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/471274/Writing_an_Abstract_Update_051112.pdf

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