

How to write an abstract

The purpose of the abstract is to provide the reader with an overview of the essential aspects of the paper or presentation. Readers often decide whether to listen to a talk or to read an article on the basis of the abstract. Thus, being able to write a good abstract is an important skill to have. Writing an abstract is often a challenge because one is usually limited to just a few hundred words. These constraints can be helpful though since they force the writer to identify the fundamental aspects of the research or presentation. Basically, an abstract provides a very brief overview of the four major parts of a scientific paper... introduction, methods results and discussions. The following guidelines are intended for abstracts with 150 – 250 word restrictions. This is a typical length restriction for most papers presented at scientific meetings.

The first one or two sentences of an abstract should provide a context for the specific study being presented.

A good approach is to briefly describe the larger scientific issues or questions that are motivating scientists to conduct his or her research.

Following a one or two sentence introduction, one should clearly and explicitly state the purpose of the study. This can be done in a variety of ways, e.g., "The purpose of the study was..." , "This study attempted to answer the following questions to test the hypothesis", "This study focused on the..." "To better understand the mechanism of..." or "The aim of this study was to...".

Following the statement of purpose, the general methodical approach should be described (if possible in one or two sentences). In other word, what major techniques did you use to find the results. Do not explain the how but rather the what.

Major results should also be summarized in two or four sentences.

The abstract should conclude with at final sentence or two in which the significance or ramifications of the findings are briefly stated. These final sentences should connect the findings with one or more of the larger ideas stated in the opening two sentences.

A good abstract is not hard to write once you know the key elements to include. In many cases, it will be possible to lift entire sentences out of your paper or poster to include in you abstract. The hardest part is in the planning. The more detailed a plan or outline the easier your abstract and poster/paper will be to write.