How to write an Abstract?

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Overview – this session

- How to write an abstract – where to begin?
- Differences between academic and lay abstracts
- Common mistakes
- Opportunity to develop your abstract – Conferences, e.g. SPARC
How to write an abstract?

• An abstract is your thesis in miniature
• A taster or trailer of your research journey
• Written version of your elevator pitch

• Think A for Abstract:
  • Accessible and understandable to all
  • Generate an Awareness of your research
  • Articulate your key research concepts
  • Attract enough Attention to keep reading
What abstracts are NOT...

• The whole story – they don’t tell you everything (by design – just a taster)
• NOT Detailed documents – are very broad and very brief

Abstracts DON’T contain...

• Don’t contain jargon
• Don’t contains results or methods
• Any sort of image, figure or illustration
• References (repeat and reference elsewhere)
Research Abstracts

Should convey the key points of the work: What you did/are doing, how and why?

1) the overall purpose of the study and the research problem(s) you investigated;
2) the basic design of the study;
3) major findings or trends found as a result of your analysis; and,
4) a brief summary of your interpretations and conclusions

Use the active voice when possible
Lay Abstracts - SPARC

Should capture why the research is important – ‘answer - how does it affects me?…..’

1) Not interested in the research design and analysis (too much detail for a lay person)
2) Interested in impact on everyday life, society, economy, community etc.
3) Must be understandable to a 12 year old
4) Think news headline
## Research vs. Lay

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Abstracts</th>
<th>Lay Abstracts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assume a basic level of knowledge of the field</td>
<td>Assume no prior knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Details and highlights the research</td>
<td>Doesn’t provide in-depth details of the research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrates how the research fits into the larger field or discipline</td>
<td>Identifies how the research is important to the ‘everyman/woman’ and fits into society, community environment etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourages an academic discussion</td>
<td>Encourages awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You are writing for another expert</td>
<td>You are writing for a non-expert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write as you would your thesis</td>
<td>Write a news story</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use academic language and concepts</td>
<td>Stay away from academic language and concepts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Succinctly describes your research (as if to your supervisor)</td>
<td>Succinctly describes what you do (as if to a 12 year old)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Top 3 mistakes!
1. Using ‘Multi-functional’ words
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Some common words are:

- ‘Protein’ – a piece of meat or fish to many (it may actually be describing cellular level activity). ‘Expression’ may also be used in cell biology and can be easily misunderstood.
- ‘Systems’ – are they eco systems, biological systems, engineering systems to name a few. It is a generic word with many meanings so it’s best to explain in full.
- ‘Novel’ – to many people this is a book. You may have discovered something ‘novel’ or a ‘novel’ approach or method but this word has another more popular meaning, so to avoid confusion consider using another word or explaining this in full.
1. Using ‘Multi-functional’ words

- Explain how you are using a term
- Assume no prior knowledge
- Consider who your audience is?
2. Long sentences
Long sentences, make no sense!

Consider:

• Your reader – may have no prior knowledge, limited time to read, limited understanding, needs to gain the ‘gest’ of the meaning quickly.
• The need to take breath,
• Pause to think and digest information
• The picture to the left is a sample word count of a typical long sentence – it is three lines long, contains 36 words and over 200 characters. If you cannot write it in a tweet – it’s too long. A long sentence is 16 words or more.
2. Long Sentences

• ‘Less is more’ for understanding and impact!
• Get straight to the point!
• Be clear before you write – what do you want to say?
• Don’t forget to punctuate (to breathe)
3. Forgetting your audiences needs
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- Don’t assume they know or want to know! **How does it affect them?**
- Understand why you are writing an abstract? **Don’t just copy & paste**
- Good abstracts = the writer does the work **not** the audience
- A good title is important – it does 90% of the work
It’s not what you did, it’s what you SAID.....

• **Story** – tell a story (beginning, middle & end)

• **Audience** – consider your audience, what they know or don’t know?

• **Information** – what key information needs to be included (purpose)

• **Duration vs. Detail** – Abstracts are meant to be short, abstracts don’t have lots of detail (NO methods, jargon).
Your abstract

Write your LAY abstract
What’s next!

3MT – a great change to practice your communication skills (both written and oral)
http://www.pg.salford.ac.uk/page/3mt

SPARC – put into practice your abstract writing
http://www.pg.salford.ac.uk/sparc_conference

Get feedback........
An opportunity to get feedback on your writing will be communicated after the workshop and prior to SPARC
Summary

• **Keep it brief**, no jargon, no results, methods or figures

• **3 mistakes** – Multi-functional words, long sentences and forgetting the audiences needs

• Remember **SAID**: Story, Audience, Information, Duration vs. Detail

• **Research** – focus on the research and impact on the field and aim at an expert reader

• **Lay** – focus on answering: how it affects me? Aim at 12 year old