Academic Abstract

In this handout, we provide definitions and examples for two main types of abstracts: descriptive and informative. As well as general tips for drafting an abstract, we include guidelines for constructing one.

What is an Abstract?

Abstracts are self-contained, concise, and powerful statements that are used to describe a larger work. The components vary according to the discipline. Abstracts of social science and scientific works may include a description of their scope, purposes, results, and contents. Abstracts for humanities works may contain the thesis, background, and conclusion. Abstracts are **NEITHER** reviews nor evaluations of the work being abstracted. Despite containing keywords from the larger work, the abstract is an original document rather than an excerpt.

What is the Purpose of an Abstract?

Abstracts can be written for a variety of reasons. Selection and indexing are of the utmost importance. A short abstract helps readers decide whether to read a longer work if they are interested. Abstracts are also used to index larger works in many online databases. So, abstracts should include keywords and phrases that are easy to search. Typically, these are some of the common times abstracts are crafted:

- When submitting articles to journals, especially online ones
- When applying for a research grant
- Writing a book proposal
- During the completion of a dissertation or master's thesis
- When submitting a conference paper proposal
- When writing a book chapter proposal

Types of Abstracts

In academia, abstracts can be descriptive or informative. The aims of the two are different, so as a result, their components and styles differ. Ask your instructor (if the abstract is for a class) or read other abstracts in your field or in the journal where you are submitting your work if you are unsure what type of abstract you should write.

Descriptive Abstracts
The purpose of a descriptive abstract is to describe what information is contained within the work. It does **NOT** provide results, conclusions or recommendations for the research, **NOR** does it make any judgments about the work. Along with keywords in the text that are incorporated, this abstract may include the purpose, methods, and scope of the research. In essence, a descriptive abstract describes the work being abstracted. It is sometimes referred to as an outline rather than a summary of the work. Short descriptive abstracts are usually no longer than 100 words.

Informative Abstracts
Informative abstracts do **NOT** critique or evaluate a work and do more than just describe it. An informative abstract serves as an alternative to the actual work. This means the author explains all the key arguments, results, and evidence in full in the article/paper/book. Besides containing the information found in a descriptive abstract (purpose, methods, scope), an informative abstract also contains the results and conclusions of the research and the author's recommendations. While informative abstracts differ by discipline, they rarely exceed 10% of the entire text. For longer works, it may be much less. So, informative abstracts are usually around 200 words.

To see an illustrative example of both models of abstracts follow this link to an open source from the University of Adelaide (page 3) https://www.adelaide.edu.au/writingcentre/ua/media/26/learningguide-writinganabstract.pdf

Components to an Abstract
Depending on the work being abstracted, the format of your abstract will vary. Research paper abstracts will contain elements not found in literature article abstracts, and vice versa. While all abstracts share some mandatory components, there are also some optional components you may decide to include. Keep these key elements in mind when drafting your abstract:

The Reason: Why is the research important? What makes a reader interested in the larger work?

The Problem: What is the purpose of this work? What problem is it attempting to solve? What is the project's scope? What is the main argument/thesis/claim?

The Methods: Scientific abstracts can include specific models or approaches employed in the larger study. Research evidence may be described in other abstracts.

The Results: Data may be included in an abstract of a scientific work to indicate the project's results. In other abstracts, the findings may be discussed in a more general context.

The Implications: In light of the findings of the study, what changes should be made? What is the contribution of this research to the body of knowledge on this topic?

Components to ALL Abstracts

- Prior to the abstract, a full citation of the source should be provided.
- The most important information is given first.
- Technical language is used, as in the original.
- Identifying keywords and phrases that quickly identify the work's content and focus.
- Language that is clear and concise.

Components that are OPTIONAL in Abstracts

- A statement of the work's thesis, usually in the first sentence.
- Literature that places the work within a broader context.
- It follows the same chronological structure as the original work.

What NOT to include in an Abstract

- Avoid citing other works extensively.
- Don't add information that isn't included in the original work.
- Refrain from defining terms.

Other Useful Website Resources
http://writingcenter.unlv.edu/writing/abstract.html
https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/656/01/
http://writingcenter.gmu.edu/writing-an-abstract/
https://www.adelaide.edu.au/writingcentre/ua/media/26/learningguide-writinganabstract.pdf