Abstract Writing
Wayne State University Graduate School

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Overview of session

• Introduction to writing abstracts (15 minutes)
• Discipline-specific abstracts: Break-out sessions (60 minutes)
  • Annmarie Cano, Ph.D., CLAS, Department of Psychology
  • Caroline Maun, Ph.D., CLAS, Department of English
  • David Merolla, Ph.D., CLAS, Department of Sociology
  • Paul Stemmer, Ph.D., Institute of Environmental Health Sciences
Introduction to Writing Abstracts

• Four functions of abstracts and relation to the reader
• Variety in length and structure of abstracts
• Types of abstracts
• Titles of abstracts
• Keywords
• Suggested activity
• Handout: References and campus resources
Four Functions of Abstracts

1. **Screening**
   - routing for a proposal or a conference
   - deciding whether to read or not

2. **Summarizing**
   - providing reader with capsule version, mini-article

3. **Previewing**
   - organizational ‘road map’
   - immediate overview of article for reader/reviewer

4. **Indexing**
   - available electronically for referencing
   - basis of keyword searches

*(Swales & Feak, 2009)*
Variety in Abstracts

1. **Length** varies depending on venue
   - 150-200 words for traditional abstracts; 250 for Grad Exhibition
   - 350 words for dissertations
   - Up to 500 for conference paper proposal; 50 for conference program

2. **Components** vary depending on venue
   - Subtitles, references, or abbreviations may or may not be allowed

3. **Verb tense** may be past or present
   - trend toward present tense

(Swales & Feak, 2004)
Types of Abstracts

1. **Summary format**

   • Set of sentences that each fulfill five rhetorical moves in conventionalized way; not divided by subheadings

2. **Structured format**

   • Built around subheadings for specific areas
   • IMRAD (Introduction, Methods, Results, Analysis and Discussion)

*(Holt, 2004; Swales & Feak, 2009)*
Summary Format

Each sentence fulfills a role:

1. Start with background, standard practice, real-world phenomenon, or problem statement
2. State the present research and purpose of study
3. Give brief statement of methods/materials/subjects/procedures, without details
4. Give main results/findings
5. Give meaningful statement that discusses implications or states why the work is meaningful or significant; leave with strong conclusion

(Holt, 2004; Swales & Feak, 2009)
Structured Format

Built around subheadings for specific areas:

- Background/aim/method/results/conclusions
- IMRAD (Introduction, Methods, Results, Analysis and Discussion)

This format can be easier to read and is conventional in some disciplines (e.g., sciences)

(adapted from Swales & Feak, 2009)
Titles of Abstracts

• First thing a reader sees
• Often used to route the abstract
• Usually limited by number of words or characters
• Structure and punctuation determined by the conventions in your field

→ A colon ( : ) may be the norm
EX “The English Language and the Medical Profession: Instructing and Assessing the Communication Skills of International Physicians”

→ Question, phrase, or complete sentence
EX “How Much Should We Know About Genetics?”
“Winning Partnerships: K-12 Collaborations in Ohio”

(Swales & Feak, 2009)
1. Many research journals will ask for 4-10 *keywords* in addition to your abstract; these are used for efficient indexing, searching, and retrieval of the article.

2. The keywords should be *derived from the abstract text* and also directly *related to the theme of the conference or journal area*, rather than being vague or too general.

3. Some journals require that the keywords be different from words used in the title; such words embedded in the abstract provide an important *path to your article* for researchers who would not find your work on the basis of the title alone.
• Assemble 13-15 abstracts from a variety of *recent* journals in your field of study
• Find patterns among this set by answering the following questions for each abstract:

  ➢ Is a summary or structured format used?
  ➢ What is the average number of words and sentences?
  ➢ What is the role of each sentence?
  ➢ Are references and abbreviations used?
  ➢ What verb tense is generally used?
  ➢ What is the format and length of the title?
  ➢ Are keywords offered? How many?
References and online resources – See Handout

Campus resources

Writing, Research, and Technology (WRT) Zone - UGL/Adamany Library, 2nd floor

https://gradschool.wayne.edu/professional-development/events
Discipline-specific abstracts:
Break-out sessions (60 minutes)