

A Brief on Writing a Successful Abstract

Stephen F. Gambescia

*Professor, Department of Health Services Administration, Drexel University,
College of Nursing and Health Prof 1505 Race Street 4th Floor, Philadelphia, USA*

ABSTRACT

The abstract for an article submitted to a clinical or academic journal often gets little attention in the manuscript preparation process. The abstract serves multiple purposes in scholarly work dissemination, including the one piece of information reviewers have to invite presenters to professional conferences. Therefore, the abstract can be the most important and should be the most powerful 150-250 words written by authors of scholarly work. This brief for healthcare practitioners, junior faculty, and students provides general comments, details, nuances and tips and explains the various uses of the abstract for publications and presentations in the healthcare field.

Keywords: Abstract, writing a research paper, writing for publication

The abstract surprisingly gets little attention in the process of preparing manuscripts for clinical and academic journals. Researchers, practitioners, and students work passionately on their projects and initiatives. They realize that what they have accomplished has value and would like to share it with a wide audience in the health professions field. Thus, they begin the manuscript preparation process and work diligently to get the narrative, data, tables/graphs, and references ready for the editor of a journal and the peer-review process. They carefully review the “instructions for authors.” However, the abstract often ends up as that “one last thing to do” before sending off the manuscript. It does not always get the attention it deserves.

This is unfortunate as the abstract, according to the American Psychological Association’s publication manual, “. . . can be the most important single paragraph in an article.”^[1] While not all abstracts are written as paragraphs, it is understood that the abstract is a concise summary of an article’s subject matter, purpose, results, and implications communicated to the reader. But it can be much more than that, as the well-written abstract

can go beyond a journal’s guidelines to provide character to the work and stimulate the curiosity and interest of the readers who the authors hope will go on to read the full article. This article provides general comments, details, examples, nuances, and tips on preparing an abstract for an article or for an in-person presentation or poster session at a professional association or scholarly conference.

General Considerations

Uses for an Abstract

This brief is written with the mindset of an abstract for an article in a clinical journal or academic journal or one needed for acceptance to present at a professional or scientific conference. However, in your career as a student, faculty, or practitioner you will see the abstract used for a number of purposes – all of which are important. For example, an abstract is used for a thesis and dissertation. Most in the health professions have their first major experience with an abstract written for a poster, paper, roundtable, or workshop session submitted to a professional association, government, or subject matter sponsor of a meeting, conference, or symposium. It is important to be able to craft a high-quality abstract, as this determines whether the work will be chosen by peer-reviewers for a scholarly session or poster presentation. Some journals publish stand alone abstracts of works in the field (published abstracts), after which those interested in the subject can contact the authors for more expanded treatment of the research or program. Similarly, some abstracts are published in a proceedings publication after a meeting of experts

Access this article online

Quick Response Code:



Website:
www.educationforhealth.net

DOI:
10.4103/1357-6283.120706

Address for correspondence:

Prof. Stephen F. Gambescia, Health Services Administration, Drexel University College of Nursing and Health Prof 1505 Race Street 4th Floor, Philadelphia, USA. E-mail: sfg23@drexel.edu

or stakeholders gather to discuss a topic; the proceedings documents what took place during the meeting.

Title

Even though the title of an article or presentation is a separate piece, when preparing the abstract it is a good time to revisit the title. Make sure it has key words that will be captured by a search in the subject matter and field of study. Creative and cute titles selected for marketing value, may not get captured in a search. At a minimum, make sure the title includes a *What* (topical area) and *Who* (study group or those affected). Example of a good descriptive title: "Patients' Appreciation of Preclinical Student Performance in Primary Healthcare Centers in Indonesia."^[2]

Why? - understand patients' appreciation of preclinical student's work.

Who? - patients in primary healthcare centers in Indonesia.

What? - patients' appreciation of preclinical student's work.

Where? - primary healthcare centers in Indonesia.

When? - not known from title.

How? - report of findings.

Make Every Word Count

The journal will set the limit for the number of words that can be used in the abstract, and with today's online submissions— not one word more is likely to be accepted. Word limits for abstracts generally range from 150 to 250 words. The trend in publications has been to use fewer words; thus it is important to make every word count. Start by writing as much as one can to answer the questions below in this next section and then edit...and then edit some more. Give primacy to key nouns, meaningful descriptors, and powerful action words.

Five "W"s and one "H": Make sure the abstract answers the well-recognized questions for any type of good communication and think about these questions in this order.^[3]

- *Why?* Give the problem statement or rationale for why this subject matter or overall research question is important to address.
- *Who* is affected or involved in the study or program?
- *Where?* Give the reader a sense of where the study or program takes place; do not assume that the reader knows the place from which the work is generated.
- *When?* Give the reader time references (retrospective or prospective; longitudinal study).
- *How?* Give enough detail to have the reader understand the method used to achieve results.
- (so) *What?* Give the practical implications for the work.

Types of Abstracts

There are several types of abstracts used in the health field for which the constructs used will change. The most popular types include empirical, program/project presentation and/ or evaluation, literature review, method presentation, best

practices, presentation of an innovation, and case studies. Authors should pay attention to proper format not only presented in the instructions to authors, but also to the type of article or presentation.

Editor's Guidelines

Although there are some general standards used in the field of health, carefully read and follow the instructions to authors from the editors or conference sponsors. These instructions will give you precise information from constructs to include, to length of abstract, to any formatting styles. Conferences often look for themes and subthemes so make sure your abstract uses language that speaks to these themes. Avoid hinting that the sponsors have the "wrong" theme, and they should accept your work.

The Constructs of an Abstract

As mentioned earlier, it is important to follow the journal's instructions or instructions from a meeting's sponsor to know what constructs or headings to include in the abstract. The challenge here is that they may give only one or two examples (usually research or project focus) but the type of article or presentation the authors wish to submit may lend itself to different labels. Editors and reviewers will often give some latitude to the authors on the actual labels. However, stay true to the formatting requirements, especially if you are asked to provide a structured abstract. This is not the time to get creative with formatting. An abstract needs to be a no-nonsense, efficient, and easy-to-read paragraph. The health professions have adopted a "structured abstract", which include standard and well-recognized headings with organized and spacious narrative.^[4] The structured abstract guides authors in presenting information in a standard manner that improves efficiency of reading and review, the peer-review process, and helps with electronic bibliometric searches. For example, MEDLINE uses the headings Background, Objective, Methods, Results, and Conclusions. Below are helpful details on what each construct should include or what questions need to be answered as discussed earlier.

Background/Rationale/Problem Statement

These are three common labels used for the first portion of the abstract. In most abstracts it is appropriate to define a health professions challenge, problem or concern and to provide some background to the issue. What are the reasons for studying this issue? Why is this problem or issue important? Even common health professions problems or issues need to be defined further to give readers information about why this deserves their attention – its relevance in the field. Authors should include a statement of overall purpose, goals, or objectives of the project evaluation or primary research.

Methods

Health studies usually involve people and groups of people. Studies can take any of various levels of study, from the individual to groups, institutions, communities, societies, and even worldwide. In the methods section use terms that help the reader understand the characteristics of the people or organizations involved in the study or program, for example, sex, age, race, ethnic group, occupation, geographic location, etc., In this section, define for the reader the research methods used and the methods used in a health enhancing initiative or program to achieve program ends. A methods section is quite detailed in a journal article, so in a brief abstract it will be a challenge to write just a few sentences describing the most important features of the methods. Use easily recognized terms for your area of study and do not get weighed down with too many details about the methods; overwriting is tempting in this part.

Findings/Results

This is often the most important section of the abstract because it is the *raison d'être* of academic research and scholarly publications. Readers want to cut through the chaff to see what you found... What is new (and hopefully exciting) about your findings? However, there are several approaches to writing this section. Those interested in traditional basic science reports or quantitative studies tend to want to have data rich findings; give the reader just the numbers. Another approach is to give qualitative, overview statements about the findings and expect that the reader will refer to the full article to "get the numbers."

Interpretation/Discussion

This should be the most interesting and exciting part of the abstract and full article as it allows the authors to express their opinion for what the findings mean in the area under study. Authors can write with more subjectivity, passion, and enthusiasm for their work. Here is where the research can come alive! This is where the article moves beyond the descriptive to meaningful synthesis and analysis of the issue under study. However, impressions given should be based on the findings of the research unless the article is by design a commentary.

Implications for Practice or Further Research Needed

Authors in health professions journals are sometimes asked to address the implications for practice given the results of their research. One can think of this as the section to answer the "So what?" question that the critical reader will be asking. This is especially true in health studies. How does the research or program help the health professional, educator, or manager in practice? How does the research or results of a demonstration project help or hinder the day-to-day work of a health enhancing professional? In basic science terms, this section usually addresses what further research is needed or "FRN."

Keywords

Again, as with the abstract itself, keywords will not demand a lot of writing but nevertheless need to be right on target. Keywords are used to help the editor assign papers or posters to peer-reviewers, and they are used to help file, store, and retrieve information by medical libraries after indexing. Make sure the keywords reflect how people will search for articles, which may be a bit different than words used in the article itself. The keywords may actually not be used in the abstract or article, but communicate the concept of the article. For example, one phrase listed among this article's keywords is "writing for publication," which communicates an action that readers will take but is not the specific wording used within this paper.

Summary versus Preview

There is conventional agreement that the abstract is a concise statement or summary of the work under investigation or of a program and its outcome. However, one alternative strategy in writing an abstract that is author-friendly is to give the reader just enough information to entice him/her to want to reach for the full article and read on. The abstract serves to give the readers enough information to catch their attention but not too much, which may negate the need to read the article or even attend a session. Similar to the movie preview, the abstract gives enough information to demonstrate value, newness, and excitement, but not enough to give the whole story.^[5]

A Final Word

Some journal readers become quite facile at the "search, scan, read/don't read" protocol in reviewing abstracts. Editors and peer-reviewers will make some preliminary assessments on their first impression of your work from the abstract alone. A poorly written abstract for a conference presentation or poster makes it easy for peer-reviewers to reject your submission; furthermore, an abstract that is too vague or diffuse may get a paper assigned to a meeting session that does not fit the work. The abstract needs to be good enough to carry through the full review process, from the meeting organizer's first glance, to closer review by several peer reviewers, back to the editor for reevaluation, and then to copy editors. Obviously the abstract alone cannot stand in for the author's complete work, but a poorly prepared abstract gives reviewers an opportunity to turn down the work. The abstract needs to be the most powerful 150 or so words in your writing. You have worked hard on a manuscript, project, or proposal, so invest the quality time in writing a powerful abstract that will catch the reader's attention.

References

1. American Psychological Association. Publication manual of the American Psychological Association, 6th ed. Washington, DC:

- American Psychological Association; 2009.
2. Widyandana D, Majoor GD, Scherpbier A. Patients' appreciation of pre-clinical student performance in primary healthcare centres in Indonesia. *Educ Health* 2012;25:81-6.
3. Ickes MJ, Gambescia SF. Abstract Art: How to write competitive conference and journal abstracts. *Health Promot Pract* 2011;12:493-6.
4. U.S. National Library of Medicine. Structured Abstracts. Available from: http://www.nlm.nih.gov/bsd/policy/structured_abstracts.html. [Last accessed on 2012 Aug 17].
5. Jordan C, Zanna MP. How to read a journal article in social psychology. In: Stangor C, editor. *Stereotypes and prejudice: Essential readings*. Philadelphia: Psychology Press, Taylor Francis Group; 2000. p. appendix.

How to cite this article: Gambescia SF. A brief on writing a successful abstract. *Educ Health* 2013;26:122-5.

Source of Support: Nil. **Conflict of Interest:** None declared.