

# Writing an abstract summary

## Introduction

An abstract is a condensed version of your article. It provides a reader with an overview of your project and allows them to assess its relevance. An abstract is usually brief: about 150-300 words for a journal article and about 500 words for a thesis.

### Purpose

An abstract tells the reader

- What your research is about
- Why it is important
- How you conducted your research
- What you found out
- Why these findings are important

## Planning an abstract

The type of abstract you write depends not only on the discipline but also where you want to publish. There are thesis abstracts, research article abstracts, conference abstracts and so on. A complete abstract can only be written after the writing process is complete. However, it is advisable to start drafting your abstract earlier. A preliminary abstract may help your thinking about the topic and how you organise your ideas. This means you will amend your abstract several times.

## Writing an abstract

When writing an abstract, you need to decide what type of abstract it is, what the word limit is, and if it is a structured or unstructured abstract.

### Content

An effective abstract will

- Summarise the article or thesis
- Tell a story
- State the argument or significance of the that argument
- Reveal the most valuable findings
- State the methods briefly
- Use clear definite language and avoid vagueness
- Include all the relevant key words

### Structure

To ensure your abstract includes the key components, you could approach writing it like this:

Moves	Labels	Questions
1	Background/context/problem	Why is the topic important?
2	Present research/purpose	What is this study about?
3	Methods/materials/subjects	What was done?
4	Results/findings	What was the outcome?
5	Discussion/conclusions	What does it mean?

Adapted from Swales & Feak (2009)

## Language

To ensure your abstract remains within the typical length expected, it is important to be concise and choose your words carefully. For this reason, key words and strong verbs are typically used to avoid vagueness (e.g. *shows* rather than *attempts to*). In terms of grammar, the context, purpose and findings sections are written in the present tense, and the methods and results in the past tense.

## Different types of abstract

### Thesis and research abstracts

Both these types give a concise summary and are structured in the same way. However, the thesis abstract is longer, and aimed at a different audience (a committee who decide if you are worthy of a degree). A research abstract is aimed at other researchers and a wider range of readers.

### Conference abstracts

This is a standalone text ranging from 100-500 words, depending on the conference requirements. It is designed to help conference organisers decide if your paper will be presented at the conference. It also helps attendees decide if they want to attend your presentation.

### Graphical or visual abstracts

This is a single visual summary of the main findings of an article, allowing the reader to identify the article's main message. It may include flow charts, graphs or images. It is added to complement, rather than replace, the written abstract.

### Video abstracts

This introduces viewers to your work and emphasises why they should read your article, but will include similar components to a written abstract.

### Highlights vs. abstracts

Highlights are typically a list of 3-5 bullet points that help increase the discoverability of your article via search engines. They communicate the core findings and distinctiveness of your research.