

WRITING YOUR ABSTRACT

The abstract is an important element of your journal article. It distils the most important information that appears in your article and presents this to the reader in clear and condensed form. In some sense in reading the abstract one will understand precisely what you have done in your research, why you have done it, how you did the work, what your main findings, results or conclusions were and your argument. In this sense it is a mechanism for communicating your research to others (including editors) but it is also equally a means for you to be able to think through the most important conceptual elements of your research when you are writing the article. It is a way to “test” that you fully understand the *what*, *why* and *how* of your research; and that you can clearly and convincingly articulate your argument. In this sense it is a diagnostic tool which allows you to test your understanding of what you have accomplished in your research at various stages in the drafting and revising process.

Generally abstracts are relatively short at around 250 to 300 words. This varies according to the different contexts in which you might be writing an abstract, whether that be for a conference, journal publication, thesis, funding application or research proposal. Abstracts are in fact written in a variety of research contexts. Often journals will stipulate in their formatting guidelines a word limit for your abstract which you need to work within. Abstract word limit is perhaps one of the first guidelines you can use for crafting your abstract.

Ingredients of a good abstract

1. There are clear scholarly expectations around the types of information that should be included in an abstract. These “pieces of information” fit together like a jigsaw puzzle and can be written as discrete statements. You might like to use the following as a guide to writing your abstract:
2. Begin with a statement of the topic of the article or what the study is about in a broad sense.
3. Then explain why you embarked on this particular project. You might like to make reference to a gap or debate in the literature or a particular “problem” that that your research has addressed.
4. Describe how you operationalised the project, in other words your methodology
5. State your findings or what the data showed to you.
6. Provide the reader with your conclusions or your interpretation of the data and here most importantly your argument.

If you were to write two or three sentences addressing each of these elements then you will probably have a reasonable first draft of your abstract. Of course this will need revising and editing but it will provide you with something solid to work with and importantly to show others to gain valuable feedback.

Communicating passion for your research

Having said this, however, it is easy to fall into an attitude that the abstract is merely a dry and formulaic means to convey the most foundational elements of one's research. This need not be the case. It is still possible to convey to your readers what is innovative, different, important and exciting about the research that you are presenting. You do want to attract as many potential readers as possible so writing abstract which firstly contains all the essential pieces of information that is expected, secondly is written in an accessible manner, and thirdly conveys your passion for research and what is innovative in your study then these are all the ingredients of successful abstract.

Eg of a Good Social Science Abstract

- State why you embarked on the project (often because of a gap or debate or persistent social problem)
- State what your project/study is about
- State how you did the project; your methodology
- State your findings
- State what you conclude from these findings; your arguments
- Optional - Recommendations

ARTICLE

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Clonal dynamics of native haematopoiesis

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general background → It is currently thought that life-long blood cell production is driven by the action of a small number of multipotent haematopoietic stem cells. Evidence supporting this view has been largely acquired through the use of functional assays involving transplantation. However, whether these mechanisms also govern native non-transplant haematopoiesis is entirely unclear. ← specific background

here we show... → Here we have established a novel experimental model in mice where cells can be uniquely and genetically labelled *in situ* to address this question. Using this approach, we have performed longitudinal analyses of clonal dynamics in adult mice that reveal unprecedented features of native haematopoiesis. In contrast to what occurs following transplantation, steady-state blood production is maintained by the successive recruitment of thousands of clones, each with a minimal contribution to mature progeny. Our results demonstrate that a large number of long-lived progenitors, rather than classically defined haematopoietic stem cells, are the main drivers of steady-state haematopoiesis during most of adulthood. ← knowledge gap

→ Our results also have implications for understanding the cellular origin of haematopoietic disease. ← results, including the methodological approach and the interpretation of the results

implication of results (they even say "implications"!)

What not do when writing an abstract

- Don't craft an abstract which is purely descriptive and reads like a plan. Your abstract, and your article to, should be argument-driven, problem and goal oriented, and well-organised.
- Don't overemphasise what the data is saying without linking this to the conclusions you have drawn into the argument you have developed.
- Don't include quotations, footnotes or citations, or paraphrase. The abstract is not the place for the voice or work of others. It is the place for you to communicate your contribution.
- An abstract is the place for confident writing. It is also the place for reporting on what you have done rather than what you will be doing. Avoid statements like "we hope to prove" or "this article attempts to analyse" or "this study seeks to". These are fine in a grant or research proposal that puts forward plans for future research, but not for an abstract which reports on work that has already been done.
- In the writing of the abstract don't include abbreviations or acronyms.
- Do not exceed the word limit. If one is not specified then as a general rule keep to a 300 word limit.

<p>Are you aware of the guidelines for writing an abstract which have been stipulated by the journal you are writing for?</p>	
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What are these?

<SAMPLE JOURNAL ARTICLE ABSTRACT 1 - see appendix>

Examine elements contained in Abstract 1

<SAMPLE JOURNAL ARTICLE ABSTRACT 2 – see appendix>

Critique Abstract 2

TENSE USE IN THE ABSTRACT

type of information	verb form (tense or commonly occurring verbs)	examples
giving background details	present tense	<i>The industry <u>is</u> already well known for its efforts to improve the eco-efficiency of its processes</i>
describing the research activity	simple past tense, present perfect tense	<i>The study <u>focused</u> on 2 main areas</i> <i>The framework for life cycle analysis <u>has been developed</u></i>
describing the methods	simple past tense	<i>We <u>carried out</u> a series of field tests</i> <i>A large number of samples <u>were tested</u> for fracturing</i>
reporting results	simple past tense	<i>Results <u>indicated</u> that the problem is even more serious than previously predicted</i> <i>The third model <u>proved</u> to be more durable than the other four</i>
stating conclusions	present tense	<i>This indicates that there <u>are</u>, in fact, several factors contributing to the decrease</i> <i>It <u>appears</u> that the incidence of human error cannot be eliminated at any stage</i> <i>There <u>might</u> be a need for revising the list of criteria within the next 5-10 years</i>

EXERCISE: if you have not yet drafted your abstract, have a go at doing this following the guideline presented in this booklet. If you do have a draft of your abstract then check that it contains all the information normally required in a conventional abstract.

Appendix

Sample journal article abstract one:

The First Destination Survey of new graduates provides only a snapshot of graduate employment. This longitudinal study explores more fully the career pathways taken by undergraduates from two programs and examines which skills acquired at University contributed to successful employment and development of their careers. **It was found that 99% of respondents made a successful transition from higher education to the workplace, with 56% in a job related to their first degree subject. Career pathways were diverse and half of graduates undertook further study/training at various stages to improve their career prospects. Skills identified as most useful were oral and written communication, team working, personal organisation, self-motivation and subject knowledge. Areas recommended for curriculum development were subject specific practical skills, information technology and additional support with career advice and guidance** (Shah, Pell & Brooke 2004, p.9)

Shah A., Pell, K. & Brooke, P (2004) "Beyond first destinations: graduate employability survey", Active Learning in Higher Education volume 5 issue 1, pages 9-26.

Problem statement

Topic or focus of the research

Findings

Conclusions

Argument

Sample journal abstract two:

The aim of this paper is to understand the dynamics of religious conversion in a heterodox Muslim community (the Abdal) in the town of Fethiye, southwestern Turkey. Religious conversion is a process triggered by social stress and changes, motivated by a desire for social mobility, and inspired by charismatic leaders. These factors frame the dynamics of religious change experienced in this contemporary Abdal community. I address two research questions: how has regional development, chrome ore mining and tourism, led to the marginalization of the Abdal? How do the Abdal seek to redefine their social position through religious conversion? The paper provides a textual analysis of the contested religious discourses of spiritual leaders who have created schisms within the Abdal community; despite being employed as means to transcend the structures of inequality and oppression. Ultimately the paper exposes both the divisive and unifying nature of religion. The work is novel because it investigates religious transformation in rural Turkey precipitated by regional development. Whilst scholars have studied religious transformation among urban heterodox Muslim communities in contexts of migration, domestic political change and new media, no attention has been given to the context of regional development, nor religious change in Abdal communities.

Aim

Research question

Contribution

Gap