



Writing Abstracts

This guide online: go.iu.edu/3LX9

1. About

An abstract is a short, objective description of an intellectual resource, usually a written document. Professors often assign students to write abstracts to accompany their papers.

When writing an abstract, it is important to keep in mind the purposes of an abstract. One main purpose is to provide readers with useful information about a document. Another main purpose of an abstract is to help readers to evaluate and select a document that they would find useful in their own research. An abstract should allow a reader to get the bare-bones information about a document without requiring them to read the actual document.

An abstract is NOT, however, a simple summary of a document; neither is it a critique of a document.

2. Writing the Abstract

Because an abstract is a description of an entire document, you can write an abstract only for a document that is complete. If you are writing an abstract as part of a class paper, you need to finish your paper before you start working on your abstract.

Keep in mind **the ABCs of a good abstract**:

- **Accuracy** – a good abstract includes only information included in the original document
- **Brevity** – a good abstract gets straight to the point, contains precise language, and does not include superfluous adjectives
- **Clarity** – a good abstract does not contain jargon or colloquialisms and always explains any acronyms

Several **writing guidelines** can make writing a good abstract easier:

- Do not refer to the author (e.g. “Dr. Seuss argues”)
- Do not refer to what type of document you are abstracting (e.g. “This book describes”)
- Use complete sentences
- Use active verbs whenever possible
- Use familiar terminology whenever you can (and always explain terms that may be unfamiliar to the average reader)

3. The Informative Abstract

One common type of abstract is an informative abstract. If you are writing an abstract for a strictly-structured document like an **experiment**, **investigation**, or **survey**, you will write an informative abstract.

An informative abstract is made up of four parts:

- Purpose
- Methodology
- Results
- Conclusions

The **purpose** section of an informative abstract should state either the reason for or the primary objectives of the experiment or investigation. The purpose section of an informative abstract might also contain the hypothesis of the experiment.

The **methodology** section of an informative abstract should describe the techniques used in conducting the experiment. This section should give only as much detail as is necessary to understand the experiment; the abstract should not focus entirely on research methods unless that is the primary focus of the original document.

The **results** section of an informative abstract should relate the observations and/or data collected during the experiment. This section should be concise and informative, and only the most important results need be included.

The **conclusion** section of an informative abstract should state the evaluation or analysis of the experiment results. It should also briefly state the implications of these results. This conclusion section might also state whether the driving hypothesis of the experiment was correct.

A Sample Informative Abstract:

Subjects' car clocks were set ten minutes fast in order to determine if deliberately setting a clock ahead will reduce lateness. One group of subjects knew their clocks had been set ahead, while a second group of subjects was not informed of the change. Over a four-week period, the subjects who were aware of the clock change regularly arrived on time or late for their scheduled appointments. Over the same period of time, the subjects who were unaware of the clock change tended to arrive early or on time for their appointments. Data suggest that intentionally setting a clock to run fast does not reduce lateness because one accounts for that extra time in his or her schedule.

4. The Indicative Abstract

A second type of abstract is an indicative abstract. If you are writing an abstract for a less-structured document like an essay, editorial, or book, you will write an indicative abstract.

An indicative abstract is generally made up of three parts:

- Scope
- Arguments Used
- Conclusions

The **scope** section of an indicative abstract should state the range of the material dealt with in the original document as well as the starting premise of the document. An abstract for an essay on Shakespeare's comedies, for example, would state that the Bard's comedies make up the focus of the essay.

The **arguments used** section of an indicative abstract should state the main arguments and counterarguments employed in the original document. These arguments should be stated in the same progression in which they appear in the document. Not all documents contain a progression of arguments; in some cases this section may outline analysis or plot progression instead.

The **conclusions** section of an indicative abstract should state the document's main closing argument and its implications as suggested by the original author. This conclusion section might also state plot resolution when the original document is a work of fiction.

A Sample Indicative Abstract:

Types of female power in Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice are discussed. Mrs. Bennet and Charlotte Lucas represent the lack of power possessed by married women of the middle class. Lady Catherine and Caroline Bingley demonstrate the power of wealthy, single women to occasionally flaunt rules of etiquette. Lydia Bennet represents the risks of female power when bestowed upon too immature a woman, but Elizabeth and Jane Bennet characterize the positive personal and social effects of women who recognize their own power over self.

5. A Few More Tips

If you are writing an abstract about a document not written by you, make sure to include the document's bibliographic information before your abstract.

Also, because you could write an abstract for documents of any size, there are general guidelines about how long your abstract should be:

- For an editorial or letter to the editor, 30 words or less
- For a short note or short communication, 100 words or less
- For a shorter paper or article, 150-200 words or less
- For a longer paper, article, or book chapter, 250 words or less
- For long documents like a thesis or book, 300 words or less

While these length guidelines can help you as you learn how to write abstracts, with practice you will develop a sense about what length—and how much description—is sufficient for each individual abstract.

6. Polishing the Abstract

After you've completed your abstract, go back over the ABCs of a good abstract and ask yourself a few questions:

- How **accurate** is my abstract? Is it consistent with the information in the original document?
- How **brief** is my abstract? Did I substantially reduce the amount of text necessary to convey the main ideas?
- How **clear** is my abstract? Can a non-specialized reader easily understand all the information?

Also, be sure to proofread your abstract carefully for errors and typos. If you have a bibliographic heading, double-check it for accuracy and correct spelling as well.

For free help at any stage of the writing process, contact us at the following address:

Writing Tutorial Services
Wells Library Information Commons
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See our website for more writing guides, hours, times, and locations.