

# Abstracts

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## What is an Abstract?

An abstract is a stand-alone statement that succinctly conveys the essential information of a paper, article, document or book.

There are two general types of abstracts, informative and descriptive, each serving different purposes, addressing different audiences, and containing different kinds of information.

**Informative Abstracts** describe original research. This is the type of abstract you will use for your Master's Thesis and Dissertation.

**Descriptive Abstracts** are general descriptions of a longer document. This is the type of abstract you will use for field reports, long papers, business reports, and conference proposals.

## Informative Abstracts

Informative abstracts describe original research. Many abstracts are published alone in abstract journals or in on-line databases; thus, an abstract might serve as the only means by which a researcher finds out about the research conducted. Because of the need for self-contained compactness, an informative abstract must convey the essential aspects *and the results* of the research.

### What goes in an abstract?

An abstract should provide an overview of the original study, including

- objective
- methods
- results
- conclusions

An abstract *should not* contain background information, a literature review, detailed description of methods, or have references to other literatures (if *absolutely* necessary, use a full citation).

### What style is used for an abstract?

The style of an abstract should be concise and clear. Readers do not expect the abstract to have the same sentence structure flow of a paper. Rather, the abstract's wording should be very direct. To achieve this, you should

- avoid connective phrases;
- avoid repetitions;
- In all cases, refer to the study itself, and not the document you have written. A description of the document is used in a descriptive abstract.
- use both past and present verb tenses in a precise and subtle manner [i.e. your study exists in present time, while the procedures you used in your specific research are past. Note these differences, highlighted in the example below.]

### Example

The following abstract is a self-contained description of an imaginary physics project. The key elements of an abstract are in boldface, and the verb tenses indicated by italics.

This study's **objective** *was* to determine the strangeness measurements for red, green, and blue quarks. The Britt-Cushman **method** for quark analysis *exploded* a quarkstream in a He gas cloud. **Results** *indicate* that both red and green quarks had a strangeness that differed by less than  $0.453 \times 10^{-17}$  Zebes/m<sup>2</sup> for all measurements. Blue quarks *remained* immeasurable, since their particle traces bent into 7-tuple space. This study's **conclusions** *indicate* that red and green quarks can be used interchangeably in all He stream applications, and further studies *must be done* to measure the strangeness of blue quarks.

## How do I write an informative abstract?

The process of writing an abstract involves boiling down a whole study into one paragraph that conveys as much new information as possible. One good way of writing an abstract is to start with a draft of the complete report of your research and do the following:

1. Highlight the objective and the conclusions that are in the introduction and the discussion parts of the paper.
2. Bracket information in the methods section of the paper that contains keyword information.
3. Highlight the results from the discussion or results section of the paper.
4. Compile the above highlighted and bracketed information into a single paragraph.
5. Condense the bracketed information into the key words and phrases that identify—but do not explain—the methods used.
6. Delete extraneous words and phrases.
7. Delete any background information.
8. Rephrase the first sentence so that it starts off with the new information contained in the paper rather than the general topic.
9. Revise the paragraph so that the abstract conveys the essential information and has a terse style.

Source of Information: Wilkinson, Antoinette Miele. *The Scientist's Handbook for Writing Papers and Dissertations*. 1991.

## Descriptive Abstracts

Many abstracts from papers are published alone in abstract journals or in on-line databases. Thus, an abstract might serve as the only means by which a researcher finds out the information in a paper. Readers frequently decide whether to read the paper or not based on the abstract alone. Because of this need for self-contained compactness, an abstract must convey the essential information contained in a paper or presentation. One of the functions, therefore, of this *brief* statement is to draw the appropriate audience to your material. As you write the abstract, keep this audience in mind, in terms of its information needs, previous knowledge, and interests. Many publications have a specific style required for abstracts. Below are general guidelines.

### What does a descriptive abstract contain?

A descriptive abstract briefly (frequently under 100 words) tells what the article or presentation contains. It includes

- purpose
- methods
- scope

A descriptive abstract does NOT generally include the results, conclusions and recommendations.

## What style is used with a descriptive abstract?

A Descriptive Abstract is written in the 3rd person:

"This report contains

" The author addresses . . ."

"The presenter will begin by discussing . . ."

Verb tenses vary with the nature of the information:

- Statements about what the document contains are in the present tense.
- Statements about the findings of a study or about an article or paper are generally *in the present tense*, since these exist beyond the duration of the research process, into present time.
- Statements about the processes or steps which were carried out in the course of the study/research on which the document is based are generally *in the past tense*, since the research which led to the findings/paper/article has been completed.
- Statements about a presentation are generally *in the future tense*, since the abstract is frequently written many months before the presentation and is meant to inform the reader of *what will happen* in the presentation.

## Example

Current approaches to modeling texts create text structures based on semantic representations of authorial intention or a pre-determined information structure. This paper considers an alternative to these two approaches – modeling document-mediated interaction – and discusses challenges associated with this alternative approach.

From: Hart-Davidson, William. Modeling Document-Mediated Interaction

## How do I write a descriptive abstract?

1. Re-read the report, paper, or article and highlight the purpose, method, and scope.
2. Use document headings and table of contents as a guide.
3. Examine the Introduction and Summary or Conclusion for overarching statements that define the document overall.
4. Write a summary of the report itself (NOT the study it was based on!), using the above materials as guides.
5. In detailing the contents of the document, follow the order as it appears in the document.
6. Revise until the abstract is both concise and appropriately comprehensive.