

Writing Abstracts – The Basics

Here you can learn how to:

- **structure an abstract.**

This information sheet focuses on abstracts for papers containing Introduction, Methods, Results, Discussion, Conclusion (IMRaDC) sections. It also briefly looks at conference abstracts and abstracts for review papers. It is linked to Information Sheet 1a: *Writing Abstracts – Verb Tense and Reducing Word Count*. An associated worksheet is also available.

IMRaDC Abstract Structure

A memorable abstract entices the reader to read on. It describes the content of the paper by looking at the following four questions:

1. *Why did you do your research?* Here you provide background information on the topic: The situation that prevailed before your research. You then describe the problem you investigated: the complication/challenge arising from the previously outlined situation. Use information from the introduction section of your paper.
2. *What did you do?* Here you move on to describe how you addressed the challenge/complication. Use information from your methods section.
3. *What did you find?* The sentence(s) here contain(s) your findings and what they show. Use information from the results and discussion sections.
4. *What do your findings mean?* If you want to make your abstract memorable and entice people to read the paper, you must show how what you did and what you found have resolved the complication/challenge stated at the beginning of the abstract. Use information from your discussion and/or conclusion sections.

You should usually answer each question in 1-3 sentences. You can also start your abstract by answering Question 2 (what you did e.g., “*This paper describes ...*”). However, a good abstract then also provides some information on why you did the research (Question 1) before proceeding to the findings (Questions 3 & 4).



Conference Abstracts

A conference abstract is generally longer than an IMRaDC abstract. It is usually structured similarly but provides more detail. In particular, you must convince the conference reviewers that your work is worthy of being presented at the conference. Results not yet available? Emphasize the challenge and the methods being used to resolve it. Novelty and scientific soundness are two important criteria for conference abstract reviewers. Answers to Questions 3 & 4 incomplete? Finish off by stating where you hope your research might lead and/or open questions.

Review Paper Abstracts

These abstracts generally answer the following questions in 2-3 sentences each

1. *Which topic are you discussing and what is the aim of the review?*
2. *Which methods did you use? (e.g., databases, number and time frame of articles).*
3. *What are your main findings?*
4. *What conclusions have you drawn and/or what do you recommend?*
5. *Are there any larger implications? (optional)*

Useful Resources

Lewin, B.A. 2010. *Writing Readable Research. A Guide for Students of Social Science*. London, Equinox.

Swales J. M. & Feak, C.B. 2009. *Abstracts and the Writing of Abstracts*. Michigan, University of Michigan Press.

Weissberg, R. & Buker, S. 1990. *Writing up Research. Experimental Research Report Writing for Students of English*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice Hall Regents.

Final Comments/Tips

- Follow what is expected of abstracts in the journal you are writing for, e.g., What do the Author Guidelines state? Is “we” used? What verb tense is generally being used?
- Consider writing your abstract before you write your paper. An unusual approach, but it may help focus your paper. You can always realign the abstract once you have finished writing the paper.
- Be aware that the first 2-3 lines of your abstract potentially appears in any Google Scholar search list once your paper is published. These need to entice the reader to access the abstract and paper. What they contain will depend on the expectations and interests of your average reader.

