

# Writing Abstracts - Verb Tense and Reducing Word Count

Here you can learn how to:

- **use verb tense in an abstract for an IMRaDC style paper.**
- **reduce the number of words in your abstract.**

This information sheet is linked to Information Sheet 1: Abstracts – The Basics.  
An associated worksheet is also available.

## Verb Tense

Abstracts for IMRaDC papers can generally be divided into two types:

1. Abstracts that describe experimental research performed in the past but now completed. Here the text books recommend the following:

Abstract Section	Verb Tense	Example
Background information and challenge (I)	Present & present perfect	<i>Previous research shows ... Previous research has not investigated ...</i>
Principal activity/ methods (M)	Simple past	<i>The procedure involved ... The analysis compared ...</i>
Results (R)	Simple past (generally) & present (e.g., for figures)	<i>The values were lower for ... Figure 1 shows ...</i>
Discussion and Conclusion (DC)	Present (for suggestions/ implications) & simple past (for work done)	<i>The findings suggest ... The results indicate ... Results were obtained for ...</i>

2. Abstracts for papers that describe modelling/mathematical processes where the research/ideas/equations are being explained in the paper itself. These papers will normally use only the present tense, e.g., *This equation is solved by ... We assume that ...*



## Reducing Abstract Word Count

Most journals specify a word limit for abstracts. Keep to this limit. You can shorten your text by doing some of the following:

- Deleting redundant sentences – check that every sentence is providing new information and that you have not repeated anything,  
e.g., *The literature ignores relevant factors. It does not investigate ...* = *The literature ignores ...*
- Combing sentences – combine the messages from two sentences without making the sentence too long,  
e.g., *Recent innovations have led to new factors becoming relevant. These factors include ...* = *Factors arising from innovations include ...*
- Omitting unnecessary words,  
e.g., *the existing literature* = *the literature*, *new innovations* = *innovations*,
- Removing connecting words where possible. They are less essential in Abstracts  
e.g., *Then, next, additionally*
- Changing adjective + noun or adverb + verb to the more descriptive one-word alternative,  
e.g., *light wind* = *breeze*, *clearly reveal* = *clarify*
- Turning nouns into verbs,  
e.g., *gives an indication of* = *shows/indicates*.
- Replacing phrasal verbs (verbs with a preposition) with a one-word alternative,  
e.g., *to leave out* = *omit*
- Considering shorter alternatives,  
e.g., *has the capacity to* = *can*

## Useful Resources

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

Skern, T. 2009. *Writing Scientific English: A Workbook*. Vienna, Facultas.

Sword, H. 2012. *Stylish Academic Writing*. Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press.

## Final Comments/Tips

Verb Tense: In spite of what the books say, many authors are currently writing only in the present tense. Follow what the majority of authors are writing in the journal you are intending to publish in, particularly if those authors might be native speakers of English. Information Sheet 3: Using Verb Tense contains more detail on using verb tense in an academic paper. Reducing Word Count: Remember to save any sentences/phrases you delete. They might be useful in a later text.

