Writing your abstract

# What are abstracts?

Abstracts are a very concise, single paragraph summary of a longer written piece to which it refers. Abstracts summarise a piece of research and give enough information for the reader to understand the framework, scope, methodology (if applicable) and outcomes of the article. Abstracts can be difficult to write so consider this when planning your time and make sure you allow for re-writes and edits when planning.

Abstracts are usually required for dissertations, theses, journal articles, chapters in some edited collections and conference papers in some edited collections, as well as for research grants.

Abstracts are an important form of writing. While they tend to be required for more advanced academic work, they’re sometimes required for dissertations, lab reports, or reading lists at undergraduate level. The ability to write a good abstract is a valuable skill at any level of study, so if you get the opportunity to try out writing an abstract – seize it!

# Why do we read abstracts?

Abstracts act as a summary of a larger work that may or may not already exist. We read them to understand what the longer piece of writing is (or will be) about, often in order to judge whether to read the entire thing.

You might have encountered abstracts for journal articles when researching for an assignment. By summarising the key elements of the article and identifying keywords, the abstract allows you to gauge how useful the article will be for your research and how it relates to your own ideas or approach.

**💡 Tip:** Many databases allow you to search for key terms that appear specifically in the abstract field, helping you to focus on relevant material by removing search results that only include brief reference to the key terms somewhere in the text.

## Other reasons for reading abstracts

### Noticing trends

Alternatively, you might focus on reading abstracts without reading the longer work in order to get an overview of the trends or patterns in a journal or research area.

This can be particularly helpful when analysing how theories develop and become established, how the boundaries of a discipline are defined, or how certain narratives or ideas become assumed knowledge.

Applying our critical thinking skills to a number of abstracts published over a period of time can help us track changes in thinking within a field of study or key points of disagreement between different schools of thought on a particular topic.

### Finding a research gap

Reading abstracts can be expecially helpful when we want to identify a gap in the existing research that our own work might fill or to understand the implications our ideas might have for debates or common assumptions in our field of study.

### Making decisions

You might also read abstracts when organising or attending an academic event at which people will present their research, or when compiling works for a journal issue or edited collection. The abstracts that potential participants submit allow you to make a decision about what to include or pay attention to.

After the writing process, the final work might differ slightly from what was proposed in the initial abstract, so sometimes contributors might be asked to update their abstracts.

### To prepare for writing your own abstract

Finally, reading abstracts can be a useful exercise when thinking about writing abstracts, as you can identify the style and conventions of abstracts within your discipline or field of study.

Understanding why we read abstracts can help us to think about the important content we need to include when writing our own abstracts.

You might find it helpful to keep a collection of abstracts you think work really well!

# When do we write abstracts?

You may need to write an abstract:

* To summarise the key content of a dissertation or thesis
* To give an overview of a journal article that you have written for publication
* To propose a presentation or paper in response to a conference call

The purpose of the abstract will often dictate the type of abstract you need to write. For example, if you need to tell the reader the findings of your study in the abstract (as you would for a journal article or dissertation), you will usually need to write the abstract when you have completed the work. On the other hand, if you are applying to present at a conference, you may need to write the abstract before you have completed the research.

## Abstract last

It is a good idea to write the abstract last because you will already have a good understanding of your work.

## Abstract first

If the work has already been written, then by default the abstract should be written last. It is always a good idea to write the abstract last, in this case, because having written the piece you will have a good understanding of your work. This will help in summarising the key information required for the abstract.

If the results of the study are not yet known, the abstract will typically use the future tense to indicate the aims and importance of the study, for example, ‘this paper will discuss the results in the context of…’

# Using abstracts as a writing exercise

Writing an abstract can also be a useful activity to help you when you start writing. Working out some preliminary ideas for the components of your abstract can give you a clearer focus when you come to write the longer piece. This process can also help you identify areas of content you still need to develop – you can leave a placeholder in your abstract so that you know what you will need to keep considering as you write.

Writing an abstract as part of the planning process before you begin writing encourages you to think about the main topic or ideas you want to discuss, so you know where you are starting from. Suggesting the primary and secondary sources you will use helps you to focus your attention on particular works you have engaged with already. Generating a thesis statement and considering its implications from the outset can enable you to check along the way as you write that each point you make relates back to this overall argument. You can also use your abstract to get feedback on your ideas at an early stage in the writing process.

Don’t feel you have to stick to what you have written in the abstract! You can always deviate from your abstract as you write – you might discover that a different methodological approach works better, or an assumption you made means your argument needs tweaking, or there are missing ideas you need to cover. The abstract can function as just an initial guide to help you get started with your writing. In any case, you will want to rewrite your abstract after you have finished writing the larger work to which it refers, to ensure that your abstract does accurately represent its content. This can be a useful process as you might identify ideas you ended up leaving out that you might want to cover in another project or piece of writing.

# What does an abstract contain?

Reflecting on what we covered in the section “Why do we read abstracts?”, we can see that to be useful to others, an abstract should:

* Closely **reflect the content** of the finished work: any readers know from the abstract what to expect from the larger work, so they can decide whether to commit time and effort to reading it or to include it in the collection or event programme.
* **Include key terms** that make our work easy to find in database searches and easy for researchers to scan to check its relevance.
* Allow readers to **situate our work** in relevant debates or schools of thought in order to understand which other research our ideas are in conversation with and what our work contributes to the existing body of knowledge on a topic.

It might help to think of your abstract as a shop window: a display lets passers-by know what they can expect to find inside, enticing them in by presenting a carefully curated selection of the products that can be found in the store. If your abstract, like a shop window, features content that isn’t “in stock” (that is, isn’t also mentioned in the longer piece of work) then this can be disappointing or frustrating for your readers. You want your abstract to draw people in, but you also need to accurately portray your ideas, so as not to waste readers’ time and effort. The best abstracts will both succinctly capture the message of your work and leave the readers feeling intrigued to engage with your writing in more depth.

## Urgency and concision

Because the abstract is how you convince the reader to read the rest of your paper, it should clearly show the urgency of the research and the contribution that it makes to the field or discipline.

Part of writing an abstract that is clear, engaging and that demonstrates the urgency of the work is writing concisely. Some useful resources to help with this include the Univesity of Manchester’s [Academic Phrasebank](https://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/) and materials from the [University Centre for Academic English](https://www.ucae.manchester.ac.uk/study/).

## Scope

If you are submitting an abstract proposing an article you will submit to a journal, you also need to demonstrate that your work fits within the remit of the journal. Likewise, an abstract for a conference or research seminar needs to convince the organisers that your paper or presentation responds to the overall theme(s) structuring the events.

You will need to make sure you have read the conference description carefully to ensure your abstract shows why the attendees will be keen to see your work and what knowledge or understanding they will gain from it. Think about your intended audience: your work might be very interesting in itself, but to be included, you need to demonstrate the likely relationship between your work and others’. Engaging with the outline of the academic event in question will show the organizers how your work joins in a broader conversation and enable them to visualize what papers or presentations to place alongside yours.

A quick way to improve your abstract is to identify any significant terminology or concepts used in the invitation for submissions: make sure to include these prominently in your abstract so it’s clear how your work ties in with the broader project. Other strategies for boosting your abstract’s appeal include refining how you state the methods, conclusions, and implications of your work, so that these elements are clear, concise, easy for your reader to identify, and – crucially – intriguing! You want to generate a sense of curiosity in the readers of your abstract, so they will want to hear more about your wider work.

## Keywords

Another aspect of abstract writing to consider is keywords: these are terms that help readers identify at a glance what your research is about. Think of these like tags on a social media post – they make it easier for readers to find your work in searches and grasp the overall topic of your writing very quickly. Sometimes you will be asked to submit a few keywords (usually about 5-8 words or short phrases) when you submit your abstract.

# Starting to write an abstract

It can be challenging to summarise an entire piece of writing in just one page (abstracts are usually 300-500 words, depending on the type of research; for example, an abstract for a Bachelor’s dissertation may be of a different length to an abstract for a PhD thesis).

It can help to break down the elements that you will need to include in your abstract to help with planning and writing its content. Having a look at abstracts from journal articles or submitted dissertations can be a good place to obtain some ideas for writing your own abstract, we will look at some examples later.

You may also like to ask yourself the following questions to begin to form the content of your abstract:

* **What** is the subject area from which your own research derives?
* **What** is the research paper’s specific focus within the above research area?
* **Why** is the research needed?
* **How** did you collect your data?
* **What** are the main results (i.e. the most interesting aspect of your study)?
* **What** are the implications for your results?

The London School of Economics [outlines these steps as specific sentences](https://info.lse.ac.uk/current-students/student-futures/how-to-write-an-abstract), which you can use as a structuring guide for your abstract:

**Sentence 1:** Introduce the topic to your target audience. In this part you should consider defining the key concepts in your study.

**Sentence 2:** Define the gap in the literature by briefly describing the main existing theories or arguments about your topic and identifying their limitations.

**Sentence 3:** Explain how your research can fill in a gap in the knowledge and what value it adds to previous literature.

**Sentence 4:** Outline the specific details of your project. Include the data, the theories, the methodology, and the case studies that you used in your research.

**Sentence 5:** Clearly state your main argument. This sentence should summarise the key findings of your work and their contribution to the field.

**Sentence 6:** Last but not least, end your abstract with a strong conclusion, that defines the relevance of your study and that entices the reader to continue learning more about your research.

# Editing your abstract

Editing is a crucial part of writing an abstract. Because abstracts tend to be so short in comparison to other genres of academic writing, it’s easy to underestimate the time and effort it takes to produce a high-quality abstract. Sometimes you might genuinely be in a rush to get an abstract in before a deadline, and just need to send something off quickly – that’s okay! If you do have time though, it’s worth honing your abstract, because some small tweaks can make a huge difference.

This is particularly the case if you are submitting an abstract in response to a call for papers or presentations (CFPs), whether for a conference, journal special issue, or similar. Because your abstract will be competing against other abstracrs for inclusion, you need to ensure:

* Your abstract makes a **clear and compelling case** for why your work should be accepted.
* The **content and significance** of the longer piece of work you intend to produce is easy to discern.

As aforementioned, you might write your abstract at different stages of the writing process – perhaps before you start writing the longer piece, perhaps when you have finished. In any case, you will want to revise your abstract a few times to improve on your first attempt.

Even if you are not submitting the abstract in advance of a longer piece of writing, you should make sure to read through your essay or project again and then revisit your abstract to ensure that your abstract accurately reflects the content of the longer piece of work.

# Proofreading and feedback

Make sure to proofread your abstract before submission. Your abstract is the first impression, so make it count. It’s easy to rush an abstract and miss a crucial spelling mistake in the first line!

As part of the editing process, try to get feedback from someone in your field, if you can. This will help you develop a sense of style, key components, and structure you need to aim for. Getting feedback on an abstract is also a great way to build your network, as more established researchers will be more likely to have time to give feedback on your ideas in the form of an abstract than a longer piece of writing.

## Important elements to check before you submit

* **Spelling and grammar**, including that the names of any key scholars, texts, theories, or concepts are correct.
* **Your abstract meets any word or character count requirements:** use the space you have been given but keep to the requested limit. Often the person(s) reading your abstract will have a large number to read through, so won’t appreciate having to read overly long abstracts. Some online forms may also have word or character limits – you don’t want to have your final sentence cut off!
* You have included **relevant keywords** (for more on this, see earlier section).

# Summary and further support

We hope you find the guidance in this resource useful for writing your abstract!

If the abstract you are writing is for an academic paper you may want to check out [My Research Essentials](https://www.library.manchester.ac.uk/training/my-research-essentials/) online guides and workshops. For abstracts relating to dissertations, we have further guidance and workshops available via [My Learning Essentials](https://www.library.manchester.ac.uk/training/my-learning-essentials/). We have linked to the key resources below: