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Editorial: Writing the Abstract of Your Manuscript

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In the September 2013 issue of *Nurse Author & Editor*, we discussed the importance of the title of an article. The abstract is equally important: the title and abstract are typically the only parts of a journal article that are accessible online and are free. Individuals searching for relevant publications will scan the titles and abstracts to decide on papers to read. If the abstract is well written and describes clearly the content of the paper, you can attract readers to your article when they skim the abstract during a search of the literature. The title and abstract are used for indexing an article in PubMed (MEDLINE), the Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL), and other databases and by search engines such as Google. When manuscripts are submitted for peer review, the editor may read the abstract to identify potential reviewers, and the abstract may be transmitted to reviewers to determine if they have the expertise for assessing the manuscript.

PRINCIPLES FOR WRITING A GOOD ABSTRACT

Abstracts should be accurate, nonevaluative, concise, and coherent (American Psychological Association [APA] 2009). The abstract should summarize the content of the paper: by reading the abstract, you should have an understanding of what the article is about. The abstract also should be consistent with the text, ie, it should include only information that is presented in the text. When writing the abstract, the author should be careful to report the content of the paper but not to evaluate it (APA 2009). Because journals restrict the length of the abstract, this is a time to write concisely and avoid nonessential words in your writing. For example, rather than "In order to examine factors that influence student satisfaction, this investigation...", you can convey the same meaning with fewer words: "This study described student satisfaction with..." A well written abstract uses simple sentences and the active voice (Oermann & Hays 2010) and does not include abbreviations and references (American Medical Association [AMA] 2007). Key words should be integrated in the abstract to facilitate readers finding your paper in a search of the literature and for use in indexing.

Abstracts for Research Reports

For research reports, the abstract should include the problem, purpose statement, subjects, methods used for the study, key findings, and conclusions. For some journals the implications also may be included. Findings reported in the abstract should be the same as in the text and tables.

Abstracts for Systematic and Other Reviews

When the focus of the article is a systematic or literature review, the abstract should make it clear that the paper is a review article and should provide specific information for readers to assess its validity and relevance. Beller et al (2013) developed a checklist for writing abstracts for systematic reviews, which also can be used for other types of review papers. The checklist is based on PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses), and the checklist and full description of these guidelines for writing abstracts are in the article by Beller et al on the reference list. That article is open access for readers to download and use when preparing their abstracts.

Abstracts for review papers should include these areas:

Background: objective of the review

Methods: eligibility criteria for selecting articles to include in the review, key databases searched and search dates, and methods of assessing risk of bias

Results: number and type of studies included in the review, subjects, and relevant characteristics of studies

Synthesis of results: main outcomes of the review and indication of the effects (eg, which intervention was most effective)

Discussion: strengths and limitations of the evidence and general interpretation of the results. Implications can be included in this part of the abstract (Beller et al 2013).

Other Types of Abstracts

When writing an abstract for other types of papers, the key principle is for the abstract to summarize the content of the paper. For articles about clinical practice, or other practice areas such as teaching, the abstract should include a statement on implications.

STRUCTURED AND UNSTRUCTURED ABSTRACTS

Journals have their own specifications for abstracts, and authors need to check the guidelines for the specific journal. In journals that publish research reports, structured abstracts are often required. These abstracts may include specific headings such as Background, Purpose, Design, Setting, Subjects, Intervention (if any), Measures (instruments), Results, and Conclusions (with implications for practice). Abstracts of an original research report are often between 150 (APA, 2009) and 300 words (AMA, 2007). However, journals have their own format and length for their abstracts, and readers should follow those guidelines.

Narrative or unstructured abstracts are written in paragraph form. These are typically shorter than a structured abstract, often about 50 to 75 words. Again, authors need to follow the guidelines of the journal to which the paper is being submitted.

A FEW OTHER TIPS FOR WRITING A GOOD ABSTRACT

Authors have their own styles of preparing manuscripts. I write the title and abstract after I have completed the text with the goal of summarizing the content that I included in the manuscript. Before you submit your next manuscript: reread your abstract to confirm that it is accurate, readable, and concise; summarizes the content of the paper; and includes key words for indexing. Bookmark the PRISMA checklist for abstracts and refer to this checklist when writing abstracts for review papers. Remember this: your title and abstract are important. They are the first parts of your article that readers see. When the abstract is well written and provides a good summary of the information in your article, it has the potential to get readers' interest in *your* paper.

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