

Nurse Author & Editor

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Writing an Abstract

Roger Watson

Introduction

As an editor I spend most of my time working on the main text of the papers that are submitted to me. However, I also spend a considerable time working on the abstracts to papers because some authors do not pay sufficient attention to them. At one extreme, manuscripts are submitted with no abstract and even reach the proofing stage without one – clearly, such authors are under the impression that the abstract writing is done by the publisher. Often, abstracts are very good but many, when they are submitted, are inadequate because they do not do what an abstract should do. There is a very good reason why writing the abstract is the responsibility of the author: this is your opportunity to 'sell' your paper to the editor, to reviewers and, ultimately, to your potential readership. In these days of online publishing and electronic searching, abstracts also serve to locate your paper in a relevant body of work that may be searched and to make its relevance, once retrieved, immediately obvious to the reader. A good abstract will encourage a reader to continue; a poor abstract may discourage.

Purpose of an abstract

The purpose of an abstract, therefore, is to tell the potential reader what your paper is about; if your paper is based on research then the abstract should say what the study is about, why it was done, how it was done, what was found and what implications were drawn. Different journals have different specifications but these aspects must be present, whatever the specifications and whatever the format, or what you have written is not an abstract. In this sense, an abstract is a summary of your paper - your whole paper - not just a summary of the results or the method, but a summary that includes a few well-chosen words on each aspect of the paper. These words must be well-chosen because the number you may use will be limited and, of course, readers may be interested in your paper for a number of reasons: they may want to know what you discovered, but they may just wish to know what you did from the methodological perspective. Therefore, you will need to address each aspect of the paper as if each may be of equal interest to a potential reader.

What is not an abstract

It is worth considering what does not constitute an abstract. An abstract is not a series of clues to what the reader may find in your paper: it is a series of very clear small summaries of each part of your paper. An abstract is not an introduction to your paper: it covers the whole paper from the background to the conclusions. An abstract is not a series of recommendations and should not go beyond the evidence you have cited or discovered in your paper; the relationship between the abstract and the paper should be absolute: each section of your abstract, if expanded, could lead to a paper of intermediate or equal size and scope to the main paper.

Preparing an abstract

There is no rule about when to write an abstract. Clearly, it may be written after the main paper is complete and this makes a certain amount of sense as you will have the material from which to

abstract. However, it makes equally, if not better, sense to write an abstract before you have started on the main paper; it can always be altered to fit better once the paper is written. The logic behind writing an abstract beforehand is that you should already have a clear idea of what you are going to say in the paper before you begin to write it. You will know why, for example, you carried out a research study and you will know what methods you used and what the results and the conclusions are. In this way, the abstract can serve as a template for the paper and as a guide to making the paper and the abstract highly congruent.

You will not be writing an abstract without some guidance from the journal you are submitting your paper to. There will always, at least, be a word length – commonly 250 – 500 words – but there will usually be guidance on what the abstract should contain and, increasingly commonly, specific guidance on the structure of the abstract. Most high quality journals, in fact, require a structured abstract to be presented under a series of headings and these headings will usually mirror those of the main paper. A common series of headings for an abstract is:

- Aims and objectives
- Background
- Methods
- Results
- Conclusions

The order may be different: some may require the background to be first; the content may be different: some may require research questions instead of aims and objectives; and some may require implications in terms of clinical practice or policy. It should be noted that there is a move towards having the aims and objectives of the study foremost as this will appear first in an electronic search and will most interest a potential reader in your paper. If that is the case then special attention needs to be given to making this as concise and clear as possible. Within sections of the abstract, journals may also request details such as the number of subjects involved in the study and the dates when the study was carried out. Abstracts should be self-contained in that they should not include any abbreviations, and they are not usually required to contain details of levels of statistical significance. The message here to the abstract writer is that the kind of details outlined above should not be a mystery and you should not start writing your abstract or, indeed, your paper without first consulting the author guidelines of the journal. These guidelines will, inevitably, contain specific guidance on how to present your abstract. Even if a journal contains no guidance on how to present an abstract it is advisable to have a plan for your abstract, and headings such as those suggested above can act as a guide; you could write your abstract according to such a plan and then remove the headings.

Abstracts are exercises in concise writing and you are unlikely to get the abstract right the first time. There is usually no guidance on the length of each section of the abstract but it is advisable to strike a balance and to give adequate space to sections as they merit. For example, a results section of an abstract may be as simple and concise as: 'The group receiving counselling had lower psychological morbidity than the control group'. It is wise to write and then revise your abstract several times and not to feel obliged to use the full word count. Concise writing should apply to the whole of your paper but particularly to the abstract. Therefore, avoid unnecessary words. For example, do not use 'in order to' when 'to' will suffice; likewise 'it was considered that' can be replaced by 'we considered' and 'the results of this study show' is equally well written as 'the results show'.

Conclusion

Abstract writing is an important part of the craft of writing papers and should be given the attention it deserves. Journals provide guidance on how to write abstracts and this should be consulted. When you are writing an abstract, keep in mind the purpose it serves and ensure that it serves that purpose: it summarises your whole paper and acts as a lure to the potential reader.

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Roger Watson, PhD RN FIBiol FRSA, Professor of Nursing, School of Nursing and Midwifery, The University of Sheffield, Sheffield S10 2TN, UK.

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