
WRITING COMPELLING ABSTRACTS

COMPILED BY THE NORTHWESTERN WRITING PLACE

This resource is adapted from the Graduate Writing Place's workshop "Writing Compelling Abstracts and Titles." For more information about our workshops, see [Graduate Writing Workshops](#).

INTRODUCTION

When evaluating academic work, abstracts are often the first (and sometimes the only) writing a reviewer encounters. Here are some tips for conveying essential information in abstracts, tailoring abstracts to different audiences, and approaching abstracts of different lengths.

Most of these tips are premised on research article abstracts of 150-200 words; for more specific detail on other types of abstracts, see the Expanding an abstract section.

ABSTRACTS

Types of Abstracts	Notes
Research Article Abstracts	Average length: 150-250 words Some science abstracts are considerably shorter.
Structured Abstracts	Average length: 250 words These abstracts are often easier to write and require section headings within them: background, aims, methods, results, discussion/conclusions.
Conference Abstracts	If not accompanied by a paper, these are often longer (up to 500 words). You might also write this type of abstract when proposing an article for an edited collection.
Dissertation Abstracts	350 words
Longer Dissertation Abstracts	500-1000 words



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Types of Abstracts	Notes
	These are generally required for the academic job market and are common in humanities and some social science fields.

FIVE BASIC ELEMENTS OF AN ABSTRACT

Any abstract will need to include these five basic elements:

1. Background, introduction, and situation: What do we know about the topic? Why is the topic important?
2. Presentation of research/purpose of study: What is the study about?
3. Methods, materials, subjects, and procedures: How was it done?
 - a. Unless your intervention is methodological, this is often the part of your abstract you will want to make as short as possible.
4. Results/findings: What was discovered? What do you contend?
 - a. Regardless of field, it is common for abstracts to proceed from a fairly generalized description of results to more exact detail. This exact detail is often cut when word count is a factor.
 - b. If you are presenting quantitative data, take note of whether abstracts in your field provide exact numbers when presenting results.
5. Discussion/conclusions, implications, and recommendations: What do the findings mean?

SAMPLE ABSTRACT (197 WORDS)

[Element 1:] Although organizational scholars have begun to study virtual work, they have yet to fully grapple with its diversity. **[Element 2:]** We draw on semiotics to distinguish among three types of virtual work (virtual teams, remote control, and simulations) based on what it is that a technology makes virtual and whether work is done with or on, through, or within representations. **[Element 1:]** Of the three types, simulations have been least studied, yet they have the greatest potential to change work's historically tight coupling to physical objects. **[Elements 3/4:]** Through a case study of an automobile manufacturer, we show how digital simulation technologies prompted a shift from symbolic to iconic representation of vehicle performance. **[Element 4:]** The increasing verisimilitude of iconic simulation models altered workers' dependence on each other and on physical objects, leading management to confound operating within representations with operating with or on representations. With this mistaken understanding, and lured by the virtual, managers organized simulation work in virtual teams, thereby distancing workers from the physical referents of their models and making it difficult to empirically validate models. **[Element 5:]** From this case study, we draw implications for the study of virtual work by examining how changes to work organization vary by type of virtual work.



Citation: Bailey, D. E., Leonardi, P. M., & Barley, S. R. (2012). The Lure of the Virtual. *Organization Science*, 23(5), 1485-1504.

OPENING SENTENCES

There are four basic types of opening sentences for an abstract:

Opening Sentence	Example
Starting with a Real-World Phenomenon or with Standard Practice	“Corporate taxation rates vary around the world; economists have long been interested in the relationship between corporate taxation and corporate strategy”
Starting with Purpose or Objective	“The aim of this study is to examine the effects of recent change in corporate taxation”
Starting with Present Researcher Action	“We analyze corporate taxation returns before and after the introduction of the new tax rules”
Starting with a Problem or Uncertainty	“The relationship between corporate taxation and corporate strategy remains unclear”

OTHER COMMON RHETORICAL MOVES

Purpose	Example
To describe research/purpose of study [Element 2]	To determine whether..., I/we... I asked whether... To answer this question, we... X was studied by....
To present results [Element 4]	We found that... I argue that... My results show that... Here we report... We conclude that...
To present implications [Element 5]	These results indicate...



Purpose	Example
	These results suggest...
	These results may play a role in...
	Y can be used to...

Note that the verb choice in Element 5 will be determined largely by the strength of your results, as well as by common reporting verbs in your field.

TIPS ON WORD CHOICE

- Choose descriptive words that set the tone of the topic.
- Model your action verbs after articles in your discipline. Use these action verbs to properly qualify the strength of your statement or claim.
- Be aware of words that carry discipline-specific connotations.

Kind of Claim	Action Verb
Oppositional statement	challenge, question, contradict, oppose, contend
Strong contention	assert, argue, propose, verify, claim, show, prove
Logical deduction	confirm, demonstrate, disclose, highlight, illustrate, reveal
Possible inference	imply, infer, suggest, indicate, signal

HOW TO CUT AN ABSTRACT

- Reduce your background
- Reduce your discussion of methods and subjects
- Reduce specificity of your results section
- Consider eliminating the discussion section, and end instead with your results
- Eliminate repetition
- Look for phrasing that can be condensed: “this study” vs. “we”
- Turn two sentences into one by adding specificity to the first and eliminating the second

HOW TO EXPAND AN ABSTRACT

STRUCTURED ABSTRACTS



Structured abstracts are very similar to traditional research abstracts. They are most common in clinical journals, and often go into more detail in the discussion section. Structured abstracts rely less on linking clauses between sections, because headings perform this role.



One good approach for writing a research abstract (if you are struggling to be sure it covers all of the necessary elements), is to begin by writing it as a structured abstract and then making links between the sections clearer.

CONFERENCE ABSTRACTS

Conference abstracts are usually written for a broader audience, versus research abstracts, which are often written for a specialized audience. Conference abstracts typically contain six elements:

1. Outline, promotion, and problematization of the research field/topic
 - a. Relative to a research abstract, the introduction of a conference abstract is longer and worded in a catchier way
2. Justification for a study or particular piece of research
3. Methodological, demographic, and procedural comments
4. Summary of the main findings
5. Highlight of the outcome/results
 - a. These are presented as though the research is completed (whether or not that's actually the case), so you want to describe results as generally as possible
6. Further observations: implications, limitations, future developments
 - a. Relative to a research abstract, the implications presented in a conference abstract are much broader



It is important to check disciplinary conventions and get examples from your field.

DISSERTATION ABSTRACTS

Dissertation abstracts generally have a 350-word limit. What you expand on depends on your audience and the elements of your research that you want to emphasize.

Many people expand their dissertation abstract in order to clearly state the results from several related case studies or experiments that are presented within the dissertation. However, if your dissertation focuses on a single, extended case study, consider using the same formula for writing a conference abstract (that is, expand the background section and the implications).

JOB MARKET DISSERTATION ABSTRACTS

Job market dissertation abstracts are considerably longer, at 500-1000 words. While this type of document is more common in the humanities, it can be a good way for a student in any field to narrativize their dissertation research. Here are the basic elements of a job market abstract:



- a. Overview of project (1-2 paragraphs)
 - a. Issues and methods
 - b. Other relevant work/theories engaged
 - c. Stakes, contexts
2. Detailed chapter outline (generally 1 paragraph per chapter)
 - a. Main argument/results in each chapter
 - b. Specific primary sources/cases addressed: rationale for their selection and analytical yield
3. Conclusion (3-4 sentences): Discuss broader scope, i.e. what does your project bring to the entire field/society (rather than just your subfield/academy)?

Bear in mind as you write this that the primary audience is a hiring committee consisting of academics in your field, but certainly not your subfield. Provide background and use jargon accordingly. One way to approach this is to get feedback from someone who is unfamiliar with your project.



Be wary of repetition. Don't start the abstract in the same way you've started a project description in your cover letter or research statement. Instead, try to write this document from scratch. This will help you to achieve the fine balance between necessary redundancy that helps to reinforce your work to search committees and too much redundancy that makes you stand out in a bad way.

REFERENCES AND ADDITIONAL READING

Here are some additional resources you might find useful:

- Click here to see sample abstracts from a wide variety of fields:
<https://www.gvsu.edu/gs/graduate-writing-resources-96.htm>
- Click here for a helpful comparison of “good” vs “bad” dissertation abstracts:
<https://www.thephdproofreaders.com/writing/how-to-write-an-abstract-for-your-phd-thesis/>
- Click here if you want to learn more about metadiscourse in academic writing:
<https://explorationsofstyle.com/2017/01/31/metadiscourse/>



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