

# HOW TO WRITE AN ABSTRACT

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An abstract is a short informative or descriptive summary of a longer report. It is written after the report is completed, although it is intended to be read first. In a technical report, the abstract appears on a separate page after the table of contents and list of illustrations. In an essay written for a humanities class, it most likely should appear on a separate page, just after the title page and therefore just before the essay itself.

## Two distinct types of abstracts

- **DESCRIPTIVE**

This merely identifies the areas to be covered in the report. It is an extended statement of purpose or scope. Such an abstract is only useful for a very long report because it demonstrates only the paper's organization, not its content.

- **INFORMATIVE**

This summarizes the entire report and gives the reader an overview of the facts that will be laid out in detail in the paper itself. It is rarely longer than one page and should never exceed more than 10% of the length of the entire report; otherwise, it defeats its own purpose.

## How to write an abstract

- In the first draft, note key facts, statistics, etc. that you need to include.
- Do not include a statement of scope; a sentence like "this paper will look at...." This is inappropriate in an informative abstract.
- Be sure to omit or condense lengthy examples, tables, and other supporting detail. Emphasis usually should be on qualitative (or verbal) description of the results; in general, numerical findings are not provided in the abstract.
- Revise the draft into smooth, stand-alone prose. The abstract itself should be a mini-essay.
- Edit the revision. Be sure that the abstract is complete and accurate. Double check to make sure the abstract is written in the same voice as the paper.

The abstract concisely states purpose, method, major results, and conclusions of the research. The first three are most important so the conclusions may have to be omitted because of space limitations.

The abstract should be self-contained. Authors must keep in mind that it will be read before the other sections of the paper (except, of course, the title). Readers must be able to understand every word of the abstract without referring to any other part of the paper. By the same token, readers must be able to understand every word of the rest of the paper without referring to the abstract. Thus, special terms must be defined again in the body of the paper, even if they have already been defined in the abstract. The abstract must be able to stand apart from the rest of the paper, and the rest of the paper must be able to stand apart from the abstract.

Sources:

[www.gmu.edu](http://www.gmu.edu)

Baron, Alan, et al. Guide to Scientific Report Writing in Psychology. 5th ed., 1991. 3-5

Updated by: Jordan Mallory 2013