

WRITING AN ABSTRACT

What is an Abstract?

- An abstract is a short descriptive or informative 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.
- There are two distinct types of abstracts:

Descriptive Abstracts

- tell readers what information the report, article, or paper contains.
- include the purpose, methods, and scope of the report, article, or paper.
- do not provide results, conclusions, or recommendations.
- are always very short, usually under 100 words.
- introduce the subject to readers, who must then read the report, article, or paper to find out the author's results, conclusions, or recommendations.

Informative Abstracts

- communicate specific information from the report, article, or paper.
- include the purpose, methods, and scope of the report, article, or paper.
- provide the report, article, or paper's results, conclusions, and recommendations.
- are short -- from a paragraph to a page or two, depending upon the length of the original work being abstracted. Usually informative abstracts are 10% or less of the length of the original piece.
- allow readers to decide whether they want to read the report, article, or paper.

Qualities of a Good Abstract

An effective abstract has the following qualities:

- uses one or more well developed paragraphs: these are unified, coherent, concise, and able to stand alone.
- uses an introduction/body/conclusion structure which presents the article, paper, or report's purpose, results, conclusions, and recommendations in that order.
- follows strictly the chronology of the article, paper, or report.
- provides logical connections (or transitions) between the information.
- adds no new information, but simply summarizes the report.
- is understandable to a wide audience.
- often uses passive verbs to downplay the author and emphasize the information.

Steps for Writing Effective Abstracts

To write an effective abstract, follow these steps:

- Reread the article, paper, or report with the goal of abstracting in mind.
 - Look specifically for these main parts of the article, paper, or report: purpose, methods, scope, results, conclusions, and recommendation.
 - Use the headings, outline heads, and table of contents as a guide to writing your abstract.
 - If you're writing an abstract about another person's article, paper, or report, the introduction and the summary are good places to begin. These areas generally cover what the article emphasizes.
- After you've finished rereading the article, paper, or report, write a rough draft without looking back at what you're abstracting.
 - Don't merely copy key sentences from the article, paper, or report: you'll put in too much or too little information.
 - Don't rely on the way material was phrased in the article, paper, or report: summarize information in a new way.
- Revise your rough draft to
 - correct weaknesses in organization.
 - improve transitions from point to point.
 - drop unnecessary information.
 - add important information you left out.
 - eliminate wordiness.
 - fix errors in grammar, spelling, and punctuation.
- Print your final copy and read it again to catch any mistakes that you find.

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