Writing an Abstract

What is an abstract?
An abstract is a summary of your work that introduces readers to your research and highlights why your work is important. Many times readers only look at your abstract in evaluating your work so it is important to make sure your abstract is both clear and persuasive.

When do we use abstracts?
- When responding to a call for papers or presentations by journals or conferences
- When applying for grants or fellowship positions
- When submitting a book or book chapter proposal
- When writing a dissertation or thesis (or any longer formal work)
- When summarizing a published work

There are two types of abstracts: **Informational** and **Descriptive**.

**Informational:**
- Provides the conclusions of the research
- Includes Problem/Issue, Methodology, Results/Conclusions, and Implications
- Generally around 250 to 500 words

**Descriptive:**
- Outlines the research and issues involved instead of providing conclusions
- Includes the Problem/Issue, Methodology, and Scope
- Generally 100 words or less

How to write an abstract
The content for an abstract depends on the discipline and whether it is informational or descriptive. However, in general you will include the following information:

- **Problem/Issue**: Why is your research important? What does it do?
- **Methodology**: How did you come to your conclusion? What approaches did you take?
- **Results/Conclusions**: What data or conclusions did you find from your research?
- **Implications**: How does your work impact your field? What does it mean for future research? Why would someone be interested in your work?
- **Key Words**: Words and phrases that highlight your work and why it is important. These words also connect your work to a specific discipline.

General strategies include:
- Go through your work and pull out the main idea of each paragraph. Then try to group them by topic or pull out the most important to include in your abstract.
- Read through your work once and then immediately try to write a summary of your research.
- Go through your research and pull out key phrases or sentences that apply to the four sections listed above. Make sure that when you add sentences together your verb tenses remain consistent!

**Remember**: Making your research understandable and applicable to readers is the most important thing!
Sample Abstracts
(Examples from Tufts University)

**Sample Humanities Abstract**

Between 1973 and 1990, Chile experienced a military dictatorship unlike any previous or subsequent political regime in its history. With the abrupt transition to dictatorship on September 11, 1973 came a corresponding cultural transformation. Along with the wider cultural changes that took place after 1973, Chile’s literary scene was drastically altered due to the policy of censorship, the military intervention of universities, the realities of political exile and imprisonment and the dismantling of the state-run publishing house. Paradoxically, despite the many impediments to writing and publishing, Chilean writers of the generation of the eighties attest to the fact that there had never been more literary production. The Collective of Young Writers (Colectivo de Escritores Jóvenes), which formed in Santiago in the early eighties and united writers who were beginning their literary careers under emergency political conditions, is one example of the type of cultural movement that flourished under the dictatorship. This group operated based on the objectives of generating cultural activity, promoting solidarity among increasingly isolated writers, creating a space for democracy within the dictatorship, and resisting the dictatorship from its members’ positions as writers. Drawing from a series of interviews with former members of the collective, I present the group’s history and examine its relationship to cultural and social movements that unfolded post-1973. I also tell the stories of the generation of writers that began their careers during the dictatorship and analyze their writing in relation to the unique set of political circumstances that accompanied their development as writers.

**Sample Science Abstract**

*Polistes versicolor*, a wasp native to Ecuador, has only recently invaded the Galápagos Islands. This invasion may have put us in position to explore evolution as it occurs, but only if we collect data as the invasion progresses. With preliminary evidence suggesting *P. versicolor* body characteristics vary with elevation, we gathered ecological, morphological, and genetic data during the early phase of this invasion. Individuals (n = 714) from the Ecuador mainland and six different island regions were collected by Philip Starks and Frank Sulloway in 2007 and 2008. Head, wing, and leg measurements were gathered. DNA was extracted and cataloged for each animal, PCR was performed on mainland and select island individuals, and loci were examined by polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis. We found significant morphological differences in relation to elevation. Data suggests that larger heads, smaller wings, and smaller legs are seen at higher elevations. Highly polymorphic loci have also been isolated for mainland individuals. Preliminary genetic data suggests that island-specific reductions in genetic diversity may have occurred and such limited variation supports morphological plasticity. These data will serve as a reference in morphological and genetic analyses over time to decipher whether plasticity or evolution is driving such differences.

**Online Resources for Further Information**

Purdue Owl
[https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/owlprint/752/](https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/owlprint/752/)

Tufts University
[http://uss.tufts.edu/arc/HOW%20TO%20WRITE%20AN%20ABSTRACT%20for%20Tufts%20Symp.pdf](http://uss.tufts.edu/arc/HOW%20TO%20WRITE%20AN%20ABSTRACT%20for%20Tufts%20Symp.pdf)

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
[http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/abstracts/](http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/abstracts/)

University of Wisconsin-Madison
[http://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/presentations_abstracts_examples.html](http://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/presentations_abstracts_examples.html)