Abstract Q&A:

I wrote a research paper recently and got a very good grade on it. I think it is good enough to present at a conference, but I don’t know how to find one.

Start by going to the LUC Writing Center Student Resources page, where you can either search the CFP links under “Undergraduate-Level Professional Writing” or “Graduate-Level Professional Writing” depending on your degree level. Search for conference CFPs that are in the field you have researched (i.e. philosophy, biology, English literature, etc.) and/or deal with subjects covered in your paper (risk management, technological advances, the history of the book, etc.). You can also do a web search with such specific terms. Read the CFP carefully before you begin to write an abstract describing your paper.

What is an abstract?

An abstract sums up the methodology and thesis of your paper in brief, letting your reader know exactly what your claim is and how you will go on to prove it in the larger paper. Reading your abstract helps researchers save time by telling them exactly what they will learn from your work and whether it is applicable to their own subject. The CFP you are responding to should include guidelines and parameters for abstract length (usually 150-350 words), questions the conference or panel organizers want answered in your paper (i.e. what common urban issues pose the greatest challenges to inner city schools?), and what themes they want your paper to include (i.e. research ideas for conducting academic surveys).

My paper is 15-20 pages. How am I possibly going to describe it in 150-350 words?

The best conference papers focus on one aspect discussed in your research paper. A paper of that length usually has 2-4 sections all dealing with different aspects of your research. Choose one and thoroughly describe your findings in light of your bigger project. As you state each aspect or method that leads you to your research conclusion, remember that each sentence should sum up a whole section (2-5 pages) of your paper. Briefly, you can mention the names of sources and methodologies you used in passing, but do not include extremely specific information about them – save that for the body of the conference paper itself. The most successful abstracts aim for a word count slightly under the one specified, as this allows them to describe their research in several well-constructed, sufficiently descriptive sentences. Never exceed the word count as that could make your paper ineligible for consideration.

What is the structure of an abstract? What information should I include?

Think of your abstract as functioning similarly to a topic paragraph. What is the context of your paper? What historical, literary, or scientific background information should your readers be made aware of? Don’t assume that your readers know the information you do. What were your most important findings, realizations, and conclusions?

1. Your first sentence should be a background sentence summarizing the bigger issue or debate, describing a historical situation, etc.
2. The next 2-3 sentences should each briefly describe your point in each section and what methods or sources you use to reach each conclusion.
3. Your final sentence should function as your thesis, offering a solution, advising that a prevailing opinion be revised, or making a prediction about the future, etc.
Remember that each paper is different, depending on its unique subject and disciplinary structure, but generally the abstract should follow the order in which topics are broached in your larger paper.

*I’m responding to a CFP that relates to one section of my 15-20 page paper, but not all of it. Should I narrow my focus in the abstract?*

Actually, this is a fortunate circumstance, since most conference paper presentations are delivered within 15-20 mins on a panel of 3-4 papers. Therefore, your conference paper should be between 7-10 pages, depending on your reading speed (don’t go too fast!) and method of delivery (speak clearly to ensure your voice carries). If you have a 5 or 7-page section on one subject, build your paper around that narrower aspect of your research project in a way that relates to the CFP’s subject, and write your abstract based on this section. If time permits at the end of your paper presentation you can mention, or briefly “gesture towards” the significance of your larger research project.

*How do I submit my abstract?*

Follow the CFP’s submission guidelines, providing all requested information about yourself and your work. If you are submitting your abstract via email it is always a good idea to greet the recipient(s) by title and name in your email body (“Dear Dr. Fennor and Dr. Smith,” etc.), briefly mention the title of your paper, and thank them for their consideration of your work before typing your first and last name in your signature (“Sincerely, Leslie LeClaire”).