

GRADUATE STUDENT WRITING WORKSHOP

Writing Abstracts: Getting Ready for CSA and SSSP

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Everybody knows that abstracts are short, but what is the essential information that should be included? Sometimes journals or conferences specify key components and sometimes not. In this session, we will discuss how to write abstracts for papers and conferences, how to do so if you've already written the paper and how to do so if you haven't. Next semester (January 16th), we'll peer review students' abstracts that have been drafted for submission to the upcoming CSA and SSSP conferences.

Abstracts

This handout provides definitions and examples of the two main types of abstracts: descriptive and informative. It also provides guidelines for constructing an abstract and general tips for you to keep in mind when drafting one. Finally, it includes a few examples of abstracts that we can break down into their component parts during the workshop.

What is an abstract?

An abstract is a self-contained, short, and powerful statement that describes a larger work. Components vary according to discipline; an abstract of a social science or scientific work may contain the scope, purpose, results, and contents of the work. An abstract of a humanities work may contain the thesis, background, and conclusion of the larger work. An abstract is not a review, nor does it evaluate the work being abstracted. While it contains key words found in the larger work, the abstract is an original document rather than an excerpted passage.

Why write an abstract?

You may write an abstract for various reasons. The two most important are selection and indexing. Abstracts allow readers who may be interested in a longer work to quickly decide whether it is worth their time to read it. Also, many online databases use abstracts to index larger works. Therefore, abstracts should contain keywords and phrases that allow for easy searching.

(1) Selection: Say you are beginning a research project on how Brazilian newspapers helped Brazil's ultra-liberal president Luiz Ignácio da Silva wrest power from the traditional, conservative power base. A good first place to start your research is to search Dissertation Abstracts International for all dissertations that deal with the interaction between newspapers and politics. "Newspapers and politics" returned 569 hits. A more selective search of "newspapers and Brazil" returned 22 hits. That is still a fair number of dissertations. Titles can sometimes help winnow the field, but many titles are not very descriptive. For example, one dissertation is titled "Rhetoric and Riot in Rio de Janeiro." It is unclear from the title what this dissertation has to do with newspapers in Brazil. One option would be to download or order the entire dissertation on the chance that it might speak specifically to the topic. A better option is to read the abstract. In this case, the abstract reveals the main focus of the dissertation:

This dissertation examines the role of newspaper editors in the political turmoil and strife that characterized late First Empire Rio de Janeiro (1827-1831). Newspaper editors and their journals helped change the political culture of late First Empire Rio de Janeiro by involving the people in the discussion of state. This change in political culture is apparent in Emperor Pedro I's gradual loss of control over the mechanisms of power. As the newspapers became more numerous and powerful, the Emperor lost his legitimacy in the eyes of the people. To explore the role of the newspapers in the political events of the late First Empire, this dissertation

analyzes all available newspapers published in Rio de Janeiro from 1827 to 1831. Newspapers and their editors were leading forces in the effort to remove power from the hands of the ruling elite and place it under the control of the people. In the process, newspapers helped change how politics operated in the constitutional monarchy of Brazil.

From this abstract you now know that although the dissertation has nothing to do with modern Brazilian politics, it does cover the role of newspapers in changing traditional mechanisms of power. After reading the abstract, you can make an informed judgment about whether the dissertation would be worthwhile to read.

(2) Indexing: Besides selection, the other main purpose of the abstract is for indexing. Most article databases in the online catalog of the library enable you to search abstracts. This allows for quick retrieval by users and limits the extraneous items recalled by a “full-text” search. However, for an abstract to be useful in an online retrieval system, it must incorporate the key terms that a potential researcher would use to search. For example, if you search Dissertation Abstracts International using the keywords “France” “revolution” and “politics,” the search engine would search through all the abstracts in the database that included those three words. Without an abstract, the search engine would be forced to search titles, which, as we have seen, may not be fruitful, or else search the full text. It’s likely that a lot more than 60 dissertations have been written with those three words somewhere in the body of the entire work. By incorporating keywords into the abstract, the author emphasizes the central topics of the work and gives prospective readers enough information to make an informed judgment about the applicability of the work.

When do people write abstracts?

- when submitting articles to journals
- when applying for research grants
- when writing a book proposal
- when completing the Ph.D. dissertation or M.A. thesis
- when writing a proposal for a conference paper
- when writing a proposal for a book chapter

Most often, the author of the entire work (or prospective work) writes the abstract. In a work with multiple authors, the first author usually writes the abstract. Students are sometimes asked to draft abstracts of books/articles for classmates who have not read the larger work.

Types of abstracts

There are two types of abstracts: **descriptive** and **informative**. They have different aims, so as a consequence they have different components and styles. Note there is also a third type called critical, but it is rarely used. If you are unsure which type of abstract you should write, read other abstracts in your field or in the journal where you are submitting your article.

(1) Descriptive abstracts: A descriptive abstract indicates the type of information found in the work. It makes no judgments about the work, nor does it provide results or conclusions of the research. It does incorporate key words found in the text and may include the purpose, methods, and scope of the research. Essentially, the descriptive abstract describes the work being abstracted. Some people consider it an outline of the work, rather than a summary. Descriptive abstracts are usually very short of about 100 words or less.

(2) Informative abstracts: The majority of abstracts are informative. While they still do not critique or evaluate a work, they do more than describe it. A good informative abstract acts as a surrogate for the work itself. That is, the writer presents and explains all the main arguments and the important results and evidence in the complete article/paper/book. An informative abstract includes the information that can be found in a descriptive abstract (purpose, methods, scope) but also includes the results and conclusions of the research and the recommendations of the author. The length varies according to discipline, but an informative abstract is rarely more than 10% of the length of the entire work. In the case of a longer work, it may be much less, around 250 words.

Which type should I use?

Your best bet in this case is to ask your instructor or refer to the instructions provided by the publisher. You can also make a guess based on the length allowed; i.e., 100-120 words = descriptive; 250+ words = informative.

How do I write an abstract?

The format of your abstract will depend on the work being abstracted. An abstract of a scientific research paper will contain elements not found in an abstract of a literature article, and vice versa. However, all abstracts share several mandatory components, and there are also some optional parts that you can decide to include or not. When preparing to draft your abstract, keep the following key process elements in mind:

1. *Reason for writing the paper:* What is the importance of the research? Why would a reader be interested in the larger work?
2. *Problem:* What problem does this work attempt to solve? What is the scope of the project? What is the main argument/thesis/claim? You might list the key research questions and/or hypotheses.
3. *Methodology:* An abstract of a scientific work may describe the types of evidence (e.g., observations, questionnaires, interviews) or analyses (e.g., institutional ethnography, grounded theory, structural equation modeling) used in collecting and analyzing the data.
4. *Results:* An abstract of a scientific work may specific data that indicates the results of the project or may discuss the findings in a more general way (e.g., the “big” answer to the research question).
5. *Conclusions:* What are the implications of the findings of the work? How does this work add to the body of knowledge on the topic?

All abstracts include:

1. A full citation of the source, preceding the abstract.
2. The most important information first.
3. The same type and style of language found in the original, including technical language.
4. Key words and phrases that quickly identify the content and focus of the work.
5. Clear, concise, and powerful language.

Abstracts may include:

1. The thesis of the work, usually in the first sentence.
2. Background information that places the work in the larger body of literature.
3. The same chronological structure as the original work.

How not to write a abstract:

1. Do not refer extensively to other works.
2. Do not add information not contained in the original work.
3. Do not define terms.

If you are abstracting your own writing

When abstracting your own work, it may be difficult to condense a piece of writing that you have agonized over for weeks (or months, or even years) into a 250-word statement. There are some tricks that you could use to make it easier, however.

- *Reverse outlining:* This technique is commonly used when you are having trouble organizing your own writing. The process involves writing down the main idea of each paragraph on a separate piece of paper. For the purposes of writing an abstract, try grouping the main ideas of each section of the paper into a single sentence. For a scientific paper, you may have sections titled Purpose, Methods, Results, and Discussion. Each one of these sections will be longer

than one paragraph, but each is grouped around a central idea. Use reverse outlining to discover the central idea in each section and then distill these ideas into one statement.

- *Cut and paste*: To create a first draft of an abstract of your own work, you can read through the entire paper and cut and paste sentences that capture key passages. This technique is useful for social science research with findings that cannot be encapsulated by neat numbers or concrete results. A well-written humanities draft will have a clear and direct thesis statement and informative topic sentences for paragraphs or sections. Isolate these sentences in a separate document and work on revising them into a unified paragraph.

If you are abstracting someone else's writing

When abstracting something you have not written, you cannot summarize key ideas just by cutting and pasting. Instead, you must determine what a prospective reader would want to know about the work.

There are a few techniques that will help you in this process:

- *Identify key terms*: Search through the entire document for key terms that identify the purpose, scope, and methods of the work. Pay close attention to the Introduction (or Purpose) and the Conclusion (or Discussion). These sections should contain all the main ideas and key terms in the paper. When writing the abstract, be sure to incorporate the key terms.
- *Highlight key phrases and sentences*: Instead of cutting and pasting the actual words, try highlighting sentences or phrases that appear to be central to the work. Then, in a separate document, rewrite the sentences and phrases in your own words.
- *Don't look back*: After reading the entire work, put it aside and write a paragraph about the work without referring to it. In the first draft, you may not remember all the key terms or the results, but you will remember what the main point of the work was. Remember not to include any information you did not get from the work being abstracted.

Revise, revise, revise

No matter what type of abstract you are writing, or whether you are abstracting your own work or someone else's, the most important step in writing an abstract is to revise early and often. When revising, delete all extraneous words and incorporate meaningful and powerful words. The idea is to be as clear and complete as possible in the shortest possible amount of space. The Word Count feature of Microsoft Word can help you keep track of how long your abstract is and help you hit your target length.

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 paper's purpose, results, and conclusions in that order.
- provides logical connections (or transitions) between the information included.
- adds **no** new information, but simply summarizes the paper.
- is understandable to a wide audience.
- often times uses passive verbs to downplay the author and emphasize the information. Check with your journal if you're unsure whether or not to use passive voice.

Example 1: Qualitative Study Abstract

Colin Jerolmack (2007). Animal Practices, Ethnicity, and Community: The Turkish Pigeon Handlers of Berlin. *American Sociological Review*, 72(6):874-894.

Though largely overlooked by scholars of ethnicity and culture, animal practices can structure and reflect identity and social relations. Based on individual and group interviews and observations in Berlin, Germany, this study examines how a group of Turkish men experience and assign significance to the activity of caring for domestic pigeons. Building on approaches to ethnicity that follow the “cognitive turn,” as well as recent studies of human-animal interaction and cultural examinations of nature and the environment, this article demonstrates how: (1) these men frame their animal practices within their understandings of ethnicity, culture, and territory; and (2) communal relationships formed through pigeon caretaking reinforce definitions of Turkish ethnicity and culture for participants. Beyond offering in situ data on the link between animal practices and ethnicity, the analyses and case suggest how and why sociologists should consider animals and nature as potential constitutive objects of ethnic identity and culture.

Example 2: Qualitative Study Abstract

Stefan Timmermans (2005). Suicide Determination and the Professional Authority of Medical Examiners. *American Sociological Review*, 70(2):311-333.

Since Durkheim's pioneering study, official suicide statistics have been suspected of underreporting the true suicide rate. A majority of researchers asserts that mistakes are minimal and not systematic while a minority claims that suicide statistics are systematically biased. Lingering uncertainties about suicide rate accuracy call into question the claims of scholarship and the efficacy of prevention programs. From the perspective of the sociology of professions, the critique of suicide accuracy challenges the professional authority of death investigators. Ethnographic observations show that medical examiners tend to underclassify suicides because the suicide classification requires positive proof of suicidal intent and because false negatives do not challenge the authority of medical examiners as much as false positives. Sufficient proof for suicide results from medical examiners' privileging of pathological evidence, the legal threshold to interpret evidence, and close relationships with law enforcement and clinicians. The same professional characteristics that safeguard forensic authority result in suicide underreporting: medical examiners protect their authority by determining suicide conservatively. Relatives acting to avoid the stigma of suicide and public health officials concerned with underreporting have a marginal influence on suicide determinations. This article contributes to the sociology of professions literature by analyzing how a professional group maintains authority in spite of profound criticism from outside parties.

Example 3: Quantitative Study Abstract

Phyllis L. F. Rippeyoung and Mary C. Noonan (2012). Is Breastfeeding Truly Cost Free? Income Consequences of Breastfeeding for Women. *American Sociological Review*, 77(2):244-267.

Based on studies showing health advantages for breastfeeding mothers and their infants, pediatricians and other breastfeeding advocates encourage new mothers to breastfeed their babies for at least the first six months of their infants' lives, arguing that breast milk is best for infants, families, and society, and it is cost free. Few empirical studies, however, document how the decision to breastfeed instead of formula-feed is associated with women's post-birth earnings. This is an important omission, given that the majority of women today work for pay, and many work in job environments incompatible with breastfeeding. Using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, our results show that mothers who breastfeed for six months or longer suffer more severe and more prolonged earnings losses than do mothers who breastfeed for shorter durations or not at all. The larger post-birth drop in earnings for long-duration breastfeeders is due to a larger reduction in labor supply. We discuss the implications of these findings for gender equality at home and at work.

Example 4: Quantitative Study Abstract

Christopher Wildeman, Jason Schnittker, and Kristin Turney (2012). Despair by Association? The Mental Health of Mothers with Children by Recently Incarcerated Fathers. *American Sociological Review*, 77(2):216-243.

A burgeoning literature considers the consequences of mass imprisonment for the well-being of adult men and—albeit to a lesser degree—their children. Yet virtually no quantitative research considers the consequences of mass imprisonment for the well-being of the women who are the link between (former) prisoners and their children. This article extends research on the collateral consequences of mass imprisonment by considering the association between paternal incarceration and maternal mental health using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study. Results show that recent paternal incarceration increases a mother's risk of a major depressive episode and her level of life dissatisfaction, net of a variety of influences including prior mental health. The empirical design lends confidence to a causal interpretation: effects of recent incarceration persist even when the sample is limited to mothers attached to previously incarcerated men, which provides a rigorous counterfactual. In addition, the empirical design is comprehensive; after isolating key mechanisms anticipated in the literature, we reduce the relationship between recent paternal incarceration and maternal mental health to statistical insignificance. These results imply that the penal system may have important effects on poor women's well-being beyond increasing their economic insecurity, compromising their marriage markets, or magnifying their risk of divorce.

Works consulted

Koopman, Phil. "How to Write an Abstract." <<http://www.ece.cmu.edu/~koopman/essays/abstract.html>> accessed 19 November 2012.

St. Cloud University. "LEO Writing Abstracts." <<http://leo.stcloudstate.edu/bizwrite/abstracts.html>> accessed: 219 November 2012.

Conference Deadlines

- **Society for the Study of Social Problems (SSSP):** Paper or extended abstract (2-3 page summary of intended presentation) submitted online by January 31 2014 by midnight (EST). Conference is August 15-17 in San Francisco, CA.
- **Canadian Sociological Association (CSA):** Abstracts (100-200 words) submitted online by January 31 2014 (midnight). Conference is May 26-30 Brock University in St. Catharines, ON.
- **American Sociological Association (ASA):** 15-35 page paper submitted online by January 8 2014 by 3:00 pm (EST). Conference is August 16-19 in San Francisco, CA.