Abstracts

Faced with the daunting task of writing an abstract for their article, dissertation or thesis many academics and research students get abstracted. They allow themselves to get separated from the job in hand, they withdraw from making a serious attempt to do what is required and they absent themselves from the task. How, then, can academics and research students stay focused on writing a good abstract and not let themselves get abstracted in or disengaged from the process?

Structuring a PhD abstract

A typical way of structuring a PhD abstract is:

- Paragraph 1 – research purpose: an outline of its context, rationale, research question and limits = what was investigated
- Paragraph 2 – research design: an outline of the research paradigm/conceptual framework and methods used = how the topic was investigated
- Paragraph 3 – research findings = what was found
- Paragraph 4 – contribution to knowledge = research conclusions

(after Trafford & Leshem, 2008: 149-150)

Most universities require abstracts to be written according to their own specific requirements which you must follow. There is little or no scope for you to be creative in writing an abstract for a dissertation or thesis. You are required to write your abstract in exactly the way the university’s research committee has decided. If they want it written using a specific structure but without sub-headings and in a stated number of words then you must comply.

Another approach to writing abstracts suggests:

- Two sentences summarizing the literature
- Three sentences on the conceptual contribution or main theme
- One sentence on the methods used
- One sentence each to summarize the argument of each main chapter
- Two sentences crystallizing and evaluating the main conclusions

(based on Dunleavy, 2003, 204-205)

Abstracts for journals

Writing abstracts for journals requires you to include key details. Failure to include key details in abstracts may be remedied by writing structured abstracts using such headings as: Background, Aims, Methods, Findings, Limitations and Conclusions (see
Hartley and Betts 2009, 2016). Another version of the structured abstract uses the following headings: Purpose, Design/methodology/approach, Findings, Practical implications, Originality/value (from Education + Training at www.emeraldinsight.com). These headings have the merit of making you focus not only on providing a well-structured abstract but of also helping you consider the most important content or issues to be covered.

As ever, writers of articles are advised to read the target journal’s Author Guidelines for clear advice. Reading the instructions may well save time and effort. This is especially true when it comes to the number of words allowed and whether or not sub-headings are required.

**Main requirements for writing abstracts as seen by PhD students**

The requirements referred to here are based on analyses of abstracts made, during an academic writing workshop held in April 2010, with over 20 PhD students:

- The *research question, gap in knowledge* and *rationale* for the research needs to be addressed with clarity
- The *methodology* used should be succinctly and accessibly expressed for its expected audience
- *Key findings* which reflect the main contents of the paper/thesis should be carefully set out
- The *main conclusions, contribution to knowledge and major recommendations* need to be made explicit

Other points that abstract writers need to bear in mind include:

- The need to *structure* the abstract clearly
- The need to make a careful selection of *keywords* and key terms (many journals require writers to produce a separate set of three to six keywords)
- Because abstracts are usually the first aspect (after the title) of their article or thesis that readers see then they become an important *marketing tool* for the rest of their work
- Abstracts should not contain either acronyms or references and should *always* meet the requirement of conference/journal/university regulations
- Abstracts should always be written and seen as *free-standing* and therefore as clearly understandable texts

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Common errors or failures in abstract-writing

These errors are based on an analysis of 40 abstracts submitted for a prize awarded for the best abstract at a research conference for PhD students in May 2010. In the call for abstracts all candidates were provided with a set of guidance notes about what the abstracts should contain, how they should be written and a specimen of how they should be formatted.

Of the 40 abstracts submitted:

- only 16 conformed to the correct format
- only 21 provided a set of keywords
- only 16 conformed to the four paragraph requirement

In all, only six candidates managed to produce an abstract which fully complied with the specified requirements.

Typical format errors included:

- A total failure to pay any attention at all to the specimen abstract provided
- Failure to follow requirements in the use of upper case, lower case and underlining
- Inappropriate use of punctuation
- Use of abbreviations in the abstract title
- Spelling errors

Abstract writing errors or failures included:

- Failure to specify, in four separate paragraphs, what was investigated, how the topic was investigated, what was found and what conclusions could be drawn
- The use of one, two, three or five paragraphs instead of four
- The use of abbreviations such as ‘c.’ for ‘about’ or ‘etc.’
- The use of paragraph headings
- Spelling errors
- Poor grammar
- Poor sentence construction (including one 89-word sentence)
- Use of references
- Inappropriate use of bullet points
- Inappropriate use of jargon

Overall conclusion

Abstracts should comply with the requirements set by universities and/or journals and should be written in a clear, direct style. Abstracts are ‘tiny texts’ (see Kamler and Thomson 2006) which compress the argument of an article or a thesis into a small number of words and a small textual space. As such they also invite public interest in the topic investigated and the methods used as well as in the findings and conclusions reached.

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