

# Writing an abstract

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The word 'abstract' comes from the Latin *abstractum*, which means a condensed form of a longer piece of writing.

There are two different types of abstract. The first kind is used to give an overview of a whole research study or literature review that you have undertaken and written up. In this case it is generally the last piece of written work to be completed, condensing all the key points into one or two small paragraphs, and appearing at the head of the work. It is the first thing people will read to get an overview of the whole paper. Alternatively, you may write an abstract to submit to a conference, in the hope that you will attract interest in your project and be asked to deliver an oral presentation. It is this type of abstract that we will focus on for the remainder of this article. Projects can vary in size, from a large project involving various study centres around the country, to a small audit in a specific patient cohort focusing on one particular issue.

I know many of you are already undertaking small research projects and audits in your own areas, and I hope that this may motivate some of you to have a go and submit for the conference in June 2016!

Before you begin to write your abstract, you must always read the submission guidelines. For most conferences, not just NHIVNA, you will be asked to provide an 'anonymous' copy without authors' names and with no references in the text which could identify authors or institutions. You will be required to provide author names and affiliations as separate pieces of information in the submission process. Remember to seek fellow authors' permission to publish the study, and include as named authors all who made substantial contributions to the design, data analysis and conclusions. Nominate the presenting author, who will be the one asked to deliver an oral presentation if the abstract is selected for conference.

It is important that you identify the maximum length, and check whether the guidelines specify total words or characters. It is really difficult to be ruthless and cut down lots of well-written text in a finalised, polished abstract, as you begin to imagine that it flows less well once you start removing the odd word. It is therefore beneficial to acknowledge right from the start that you must keep every sentence and paragraph to a minimum.

Also establish whether there is a specific font and size required. Generally a standard typeface such as Helvetica or Times is advised. Do not begin sentences with numerals. Standard abbreviations can be used

without definition but non-standard abbreviations must be placed in parentheses after the first use of the word in the abstract body, and kept to a minimum.

It is best to use short, simple sentences and write in the present tense.

Try to avoid tables, figures or long quotations in the abstract, as these tend to use up characters or take up too much room. On the other hand, do use a table if it makes expression of the results more efficient or easier to understand. Lastly, and most importantly, check the deadline and try to avoid a last-minute dash to put something on paper!

## Choosing a title

This can often be left until last. You should use as few words as possible, whilst ensuring that you are giving a clear indication of the subject that you are writing about.

Consider using humour to evoke an eye-catching title (but beware as this can easily be overdone!), and avoid using technical terminology, which has the potential to isolate your work from a wider audience. You want to grab the readers' attention and keep it.

## First paragraph – identify your purpose

This is your chance to explain to the reader/audience why your research is important to you, why it was worth doing, and why everyone should now read about it.

## Second paragraph – method

The methods section is possibly the most difficult section to write in a condensed form as it should be limited to no more than two or three sentences. Included in these sentences may be a description of the study population and outcome variables, e.g. what was being measured or audited, and how that was carried out.

## Third paragraph – summary of results

A brief description of statistical methods used to analyse the data should be included. Consider presenting the findings in a table with a few sentences outlining the key points.

Case studies may state over what period the cases were collected and which patient characteristics were

used as inclusion and exclusion criteria. For a retrospective study, you may describe enrolment procedures including selection and exclusion criteria.

### Fourth paragraph – conclusions and important findings

This can be the most important section as you want to explain firstly why your results are relevant and significant, and secondly how they can be disseminated to improve overall knowledge and practice in the wider audience.

### What makes a good abstract?

- It is well written and concise, and is able to stand alone and be understood by even those with no specific background knowledge (the 'educated layperson').
- It is simply laid out, in terms of introduction, purpose, focus, method, results and conclusions.
- It usually does not need much referencing.

### Reasons why an abstract may be rejected

- It is poorly written and therefore difficult to follow.
- There is overlap with another abstract detailing the same/very similar study.
- There is not enough new material.
- It goes over the word limit specified in the guidelines.

### Final draft

Ask a couple of colleagues, preferably those not directly working in your speciality, to read over your abstract to ensure it is easy to follow and understand. Get feedback to ensure that the main points have been highlighted.

Check it over for grammatical and spelling mistakes. Once you submit, it will appear exactly how you have sent it and cannot be amended.

### Important point

Conference registration is necessary for consideration, presentation and publication of the abstract.

In the case of the NHIVNA conference, all abstracts will be reviewed by the NHIVNA Executive Committee, who will inform you of whether they would like you to deliver a 15-minute presentation showcasing your work, or put together a poster.

### Further resources

Academic Conferences and Publishing International. *Abstract Guidelines for Papers: How to write an Abstract for a Conference Paper*. Available at: [www.academic-conferences.org/policies/abstract-guidelines-for-papers/](http://www.academic-conferences.org/policies/abstract-guidelines-for-papers/) (accessed January 2016).

National HIV Nurses Association. *NHIVNA audits, research projects and systematic reviews*. Available at: [www.nhivna.org/NHIVNAAudits.aspx](http://www.nhivna.org/NHIVNAAudits.aspx) (accessed January 2016).

Emerald Group Publishing. *How to ... write an abstract*. Available at: [www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/authors/guides/write/abstracts.htm](http://www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/authors/guides/write/abstracts.htm) (accessed January 2016).

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