

ABSTRACTS

The APA *Publication Manual* (2005) defines an abstract as a brief, comprehensive summary of the contents of a published article or academic paper (p. 12). While an abstract is only a single paragraph, it is a very important for two reasons: (1) an abstract allows researchers to quickly survey the essential contents of the article without having to scan the entire paper and, (2) like an article's title, an abstract enables abstracting and information services to index and retrieve articles based on researchers' specific key word and topic searches. Therefore, the abstract may be the most important paragraph the writer composes since it is likely the only way for researchers to find the paper and to determine its relevance to their research.

Central Components of an APA Style Abstract

An effective, comprehensive abstract is defined by the following central components:

- It accurately reflects the purpose and essential content of the paper.
- It does not include any new information that is not included in the paper. It simply reports on the paper's content rather than providing an evaluative summary.
- It is self-contained; all abbreviations, acronyms, and unique terms are defined, and any special names are spelled-out.
- It is concise and specific, covering only four or five of the most important concepts, findings, or implications of the paper.
- It contains the key words and specific phrases that are central to the paper and relevant to researchers interested in the paper's topic/content.
- It is a single paragraph that precedes the actual contents of the paper. It does not exceed more than 120 words.

How to Write an Abstract

Like a paper's title, an abstract is an important reference to lead researchers to a writer's paper and to motivate them to read the paper. An inaccurate abstract may cause researchers to prematurely dismiss a paper's relevance to their research, and it may even prevent a paper from being found in a key word search that is relevant to the paper's actual content.

Therefore, with a focus on the *Central Components of an Abstract* listed above, writers should follow these guidelines to compose an effective, comprehensive abstract:

- Compose the abstract only after the paper is formally complete since the abstract's content must accurately summarize the final version of the paper.
- Mimic the paper's table of contents in sentence form (i.e., the purpose, methods, scope, results, conclusions, and recommendations). The final outline is also very helpful to generate comprehensive content.
- Scan the document to identify key words and specific phrases that are central to the paper. Input these key words and phrases to aid in the paper's discovery by researchers who will use computers to look for key words, phrases, and titles.

- Summarize the main ideas of each section of the paper, and then continue to revise and edit each individual summary before bringing them together to form the first draft of the abstract.
- Begin with the most important information: the thesis, the purpose, or the results and conclusions.
- Limit the abstract to only four or five of the most important conclusions, findings, or implications of the paper. Why should researchers be interested in this research? What is unique or imperative about this paper's purpose, results, and conclusions?
- Exclude any new information that is not included in the paper.
- Define all abbreviations, acronyms, and unique terms, spell-out any special names, and type all numbers as Arabic numerals (except those that begin a sentence).
- Avoid formulaic sentences and phrases that do not provide relevant information (e.g., "Curriculum changes are discussed" or "It is concluded that"). Be direct (e.g., write "Curriculum changes include..." and/or "Curriculum should be changed to...").
- Be concise and specific, and write in complete sentences (no fragments). Maximize as much information as possible to motivate researchers to read the paper.

Like a movie trailer or a product commercial, the abstract is used to "sell" the paper to researchers. Following these guidelines will help writers compose an abstract that is accurate, concise, comprehensive, and informative, increasing the audience as well as the future retrievability of the paper.

To view a sample abstract in APA style, see p. 306 of the *APA Publication Manual* (2005). Writers may consult this sample for both content and format.

How to Read an Abstract

Researchers rely on accurate, comprehensive abstracts to ensure they have not wasted time retrieving and reading a paper that is not relevant to their research. To maximize the effectiveness of their research and to ensure relevant and vital information is present in a potential research paper, read every abstract to find specific information that will directly answer each of the following questions:

- What is the topic, subject, or research problem addressed in the paper?
- What is the purpose of the paper?
- What are key words, definitions, and specific phrases present?
- What are the concepts, findings, or implications of the paper?
- What methodologies and/or data were used?
- What are the interpretations or results of included data?
- What portions of the paper may be useful or informative?

Finding the answers to these questions will help to save valuable research time, and they will also help to narrow down key words, phrases, and titles searches in abstracting and information services.