

2.04 Abstract

An abstract is a brief, comprehensive summary of the contents of the article; it allows readers to survey the contents of an article quickly and, like a title, it enables persons interested in the document to retrieve it from abstracting and indexing databases. Most schol-

arly journals require an abstract. Consult the instructions to authors or web page of the journal to which you plan to submit your article for any journal-specific instructions.

A well-prepared abstract can be the most important single paragraph in an article. Most people have their first contact with an article by seeing just the abstract, usually in comparison with several other abstracts, as they are doing a literature search. Readers frequently decide on the basis of the abstract whether to read the entire article. The abstract needs to be dense with information. By embedding key words in your abstract, you enhance the user's ability to find it. A good abstract is

- **accurate:** Ensure that the abstract correctly reflects the purpose and content of the manuscript. Do not include information that does not appear in the body of the manuscript. If the study extends or replicates previous research, note this in the abstract and cite the author's last name and the year of the relevant report. Comparing an abstract with an outline of the manuscript's headings is a useful way to verify its accuracy.
- **nonevaluative:** Report rather than evaluate; do not add to or comment on what is in the body of the manuscript.
- **coherent and readable:** Write in clear and concise language. Use verbs rather than their noun equivalents and the active rather than the passive voice (e.g., *investigated* rather than *an investigation of*; *The authors presented the results* instead of *Results were presented*). Use the present tense to describe conclusions drawn or results with continuing applicability; use the past tense to describe specific variables manipulated or outcomes measured.
- **concise:** Be brief, and make each sentence maximally informative, especially the lead sentence. Begin the abstract with the most important points. Do not waste space by repeating the title. Include in the abstract only the four or five most important concepts, findings, or implications. Use the specific words in your abstract that you think your audience will use in their electronic searches.

An abstract of a *report of an empirical study* should describe

- the problem under investigation, in one sentence if possible;
- the participants, specifying pertinent characteristics such as age, sex, and ethnic and/or racial group; in animal research, specifying genus and species;
- the essential features of study method—you have a limited number of words so restrict your description to essential and interesting features of the study methodology—particularly those likely to be used in electronic searches;
- the basic findings, including effect sizes and confidence intervals and/or statistical significance levels; and
- the conclusions and the implications or applications.

An abstract for a *literature review or meta-analysis* should describe

- the problem or relation(s) under investigation;
- study eligibility criteria;
- type(s) of participants included in primary studies;
- main results (including the most important effect sizes) and any important moderators of these effect sizes;

- conclusions (including limitations); and
- implications for theory, policy, and/or practice.

An abstract for a *theory-oriented* paper should describe

- how the theory or model works and/or the principles on which it is based and
- what phenomena the theory or model accounts for and linkages to empirical results.

An abstract for a *methodological* paper should describe

- the general class of methods being discussed;
- the essential features of the proposed method;
- the range of application of the proposed method; and
- in the case of statistical procedures, some of its essential features such as robustness or power efficiency.

An abstract for a *case study* should describe

- the subject and relevant characteristics of the individual, group, community, or organization presented;
- the nature of or solution to a problem illustrated by the case example; and
- the questions raised for additional research or theory.

Do not exceed the abstract word limit of the journal to which you are submitting your article. Word limits vary from journal to journal and typically range from 150 to 250 words. For information on how abstracts are used to retrieve articles, consult *Record Structure for APA Databases* (Sick, 2009).

When preparing your manuscript, begin the abstract on a new page and identify it with the running head or abbreviated title and the page number 2. The label *Abstract* should appear in uppercase and lowercase letters, centered, at the top of the page. Type the abstract itself as a single paragraph without paragraph indentation.

