A beginner's Guide to writing a persuasive academic abstract

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An academic abstract can be likened to a miniature work of art. It is an academic promo for a larger academic production. Within the confines of only a few hundred words, a clearly written abstract affords a bird's-eye view and summary of work that may have taken many hundreds of hours and many thousands of dollars to construct. When well prepared, an abstract conveys an overview of the whole, a critical delineation of key elements to be clearly found within, and a preview of the skills, intricate or otherwise, that have been brought to bear in developing findings of the thesis being introduced. The abstract is a truncation of the whole, a starter packaged as an enticing advanced organiser, a sampler designed to allure readers to ultimately engage with the entire production.

Yet ironically, many writers find the challenge of producing a valid and reliable abstract to be vexatious. They frequently seem to generate what is tantamount to a premature declaration of intent; they produce a cluster of pledges that are made before their paper has been developed rather than after it has been fully prepared.

The rules for attracting institutional support or funds for conference or symposia participation are often at fault here. Institutions, you see, often require that an abstract be accepted by conference organisers as a pre-condition to funds being released for attendance, travel and accommodation. Accordingly, academics prepare and submit abstracts (often hastily) as a pronouncement of interest in conference participation. They are also avowing their intention to prepare a presentation and perhaps even to write an accompanying paper. Their efforts, of course, are pretty much contingent upon achieving acceptance and funding! No acceptance – no funding – no participation. It's as simple as that!

Hence, they often submit abstracts before rather than after the fact. Abstracts, therefore, are not always produced as a summarising version of completed academic labour. Instead, abstracts frequently seem to espouse academic intentions to deliver scholastic outputs and/or research findings in time for a scheduled event. But it is for abstracts such as these that conference organisers and Performance Based Research Fund (PBRF) managers seem to clamour which is why getting an abstract accepted is often not terribly difficult. Equally, that is why some conference organisers would likely shudder at the prospect of being limited to accepting an abstract in tandem with a completed paper. After all, such a practice might undermine attendance and profitability...

An abstract, therefore, ideally foreshadows the presentation of completed work. It might introduce an already formulated presentation, or a paper, or a report that is ready to be considered for publication, or perhaps even a thesis that is to be submitted for examination. A robust abstract, however, will invariably address four central questions which ask:

1. *What is it about?*
2. *What did you do?*
3. *What did you find? and,*
4. *How is that important?*[1]

It is suggested that when these fundamental questions are addressed, a useful abstract will emerge because when concise answers are given, the writer will almost certainly have captured the essence of their academic output. But there is another way of producing an abstract; albeit a way that is a tad more prescriptive – in fact – it is rather akin to painting by numbers which is an activity I view askance. It is argued that because an abstract is, in an oblique manner, rather like a mini table of contents for what is to ensue, the seven foci

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[1] Liz Beddoe of the University of Auckland posed questions like these at a Scholastic Writing Workshop I facilitated during a thesis writers' retreat held at the Woodhill Park Research Retreat and I acknowledge her triggering of these questions – perhaps not entirely as per the wording shown.

shown below are likely to reflect, with considerable accuracy, what should be presented, each in a short sentence of statement.

1	Issue	Write words which tell the reader what the thesis/argument is and/or what the work was broadly about.
2	Question	Write words which simply state what the specific issues, or goals, or objectives, or question/s, or hypotheses, were about.
3	Strategy	Write words which nominate the methodology and tell what methods were used upon what and or whom and why.
4	Found	Write words which encapsulate the overall finding/s.
5	Process key data	Write words which highlight the most important general and specific findings.
6	Hassles'n'highlights	Write words which identify difficulties and/or challenges and/or unexpected bonuses which arose.
7	Next	Finally, write words which contemplate likely future implications and/or research directions.

Clearly, this foci list is not absolute. The sequence in which matters are dealt with will vary depending upon the whims and wills of the abstract writer and depending also upon the nature of the research being corralled within the abstract. Equally, the number of words available will frame the abstract as will discipline-specific conventions. In my experience, a useful abstract will generally comply with these foci and will have an attention-grabbing title as well as captivating text! The abstract that emerges will typically be presented as a single paragraph and will mainly be written in the past tense (although you can hardly write about the future by using the past tense). Using the tool AutoSummarise (which can be found within MS Word 2007 by clicking on the Customize Quick Access Toolbar and selecting More Commands) can help you to tighten your work so that it becomes concentrated.

An abstract that is concentrated is potent and potency heralds work that is mainly resolute. A well constracted abstract, therefore, is staunch writing that conveys maximum meaning through minimum words. It is a professional gem which we should learn to prepare and present as a miniature work of art, ideally after the event rather than beforehand. Happy abstracting!