

## 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 theme or 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.

They traverse a range of forms and purposes, however, which are moulded by the targeted event and the anticipated audience; an abstract for a conference presentation differs from a poster promo and an abstract for an academic paper is different to that which can be found in chapters within a text-book. And abstracts buried within anthologies of writings have a different form again.

Yet ironically, irrespective of its purpose or platform, 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 offering 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 precondition 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 avowing their intention to prepare a presentation and perhaps even to write an accompanying paper. Perhaps? 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.

Rules associated with becoming published in scholarly journals, text-books, or anthologies, or even for presenting a poster, vary like the four seasons. Some, like abstracts are like spring; they advertise what is to come in the hope that by the time the promised event arrives, work will have moved beyond potentially blossoming to actually bearing fruit. Other abstracts, however, are like a product of a seeming winter of discontent; they're necessarily cold, clinical and the very epitome of crisp and frosty brevity. And there are abstracts which fall between such polarities...

Wherever they may sit on a continuum of form and whatever their purpose, all abstracts ideally foreshadow the presentation of completed work. An abstract 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, or even a pending workshop. 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?*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

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

This first of these forms is for a *presentation abstract* but below that are others, each of which is slightly different. They are all intended to help you to develop different forms of abstracts be they associated with poster presentations, the submission of a thesis, report preparation, the running of a workshop, an academic event, and so on... There are also a series of blank forms which you can copy or edit to suit your own purposes and you are freely invited to use these forms as you please. Moreover, you're invited to distribute them to colleagues and students alike because there's no copyright although it will be expected that common academic courtesies will be followed. By the way, you might also appreciate this cartoon on ['abstract art'](#) from Jorge, the creator of Piled Higher and Deeper.

### Creating an abstract for a presentation

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 and 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 for theory and/or research directions.

### Creating an abstract for a book chapter or journal article or anthology

1	Topic or purpose	Write words which tell the reader what the chapter is broadly and mainly about.
2	Outcomes	Write words which state what the learning outcomes are – that is – what the reader will have learned from reading the chapter.
3	Concepts, Strategies, Theories	Write words which nominate key concepts to be shared, methods which were used upon what and or whom and why and nominate germane or pivotal theories.
4	Content	Write words which highlight principal content highlights which are traversed.
5	Process key data	Write words which highlight the most important chapter points.
6	Hassles and highlights	Write words which identify likely reader challenges and/or fascinating moguls which emerged.
7	Next	Finally, write words which contemplate possible implications for the reader and nominate what might come next.

## Creating an abstract for a poster

1	Issue	Write gripping words which tell the reader what the poster thesis/argument is and/or what the poster is broadly about.
2	Question	Write words which simply state what the specific purpose of the poster is.
3	Strategy	Write words about methodology (research approach) and tell what methods (research procedures) were used upon what and or whom and why.
4	Found	Write words which encapsulate the most important finding/s to be flagged.
5	Process key data	Write words which highlight important specific findings and their link/s to theory.
6	Hassles and 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 and implications for theory and publishing.

## Creating an abstract for a thesis (350 words for a PhD, less for a masters or dissertation)

1	Issue	Write words which tell the examiners what your unique thesis/argument is and what theory your work uniquely traverses and contribute to.
2	Question & theoretical framework	Write words which tell examiners what the specific issues, or goals, or objectives, or questions, or hypotheses, your thesis explores. Nominate key theories and theoretical approaches to your research.
3	Strategy	Write words which nominate the methodology and tell what methods were used upon what and or whom and why. Remember to mention ethics.
4	Found	Write words which encapsulate overall finding/s and their relationship to theory.
5	Process key data	Write words which highlight the most important general and specific findings and their links to theory and the thesis argument.
6	Hassles and 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 as well as theoretical consequences of the research.

## Creating an abstract for a workshop or continuing education event

1	Issue	Write words which tell the reader what the workshop will be about
2	Benefits	Write words which tell potential participants what they will gain from participation. Tell them who should register for the event and why they should do so.
3	Strategy	Write words which tell potential participants about how the workshop will be run and by whom. Tell them about the venue a
4	Trimming	Write words which tell participants what they will be able to leave with. Tell them about the venue, notes, catering and parking.
5	Next	Finally, write words which broadcast likely future events and the imperative of registering NOW!

Clearly, this list of abstract types is not absolute and neither are the categories within the forms above the only ones which can be devised. The sequence in which matters are dealt with, and the emphasis accorded will

vary depending upon the whims and wills of the abstract writer and will be shaped by the nature of the scholastic work or research or event being corralled for inclusion 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 the foci I've nominated within the various categories and ideally your abstract will have an attention-grabbing title as well as captivating text! Typically abstracts are presented as a single paragraph and they're mainly written in the past tense and in active rather than passive language. Using any tool that condenses verbosity will tighten your work so that it becomes deliberately concentrated ([Perry & Hansen, 2013](#)).

An abstract that is concentrated is potent and its potency proclaims work that is intentionally resolute. A well-constructed 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 planning and work has been undertaken rather than beforehand when we are likely to be operating in the realms of formative speculation. Happy abstracting!

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## Template for creating your own presentation abstract

### Title of your presentation

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 and 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 for theory and/or research directions.	

### Notes

## Create your own abstract for a book chapter or journal article or anthology

### Title of your contribution

1	Topic or purpose	Write words which tell the reader what the chapter is broadly and mainly about.	
2	Outcomes	Write words which state what the learning outcomes are – that is – what the reader will have learned from reading the chapter.	
3	Concepts, Strategies, Theories	Write words which nominate key concepts to be shared, methods which were used upon what and or whom and why and nominate germane or pivotal theories.	
4	Content	Write words which highlight principal content highlights which are traversed.	
5	Process key data	Write words which highlight the most important chapter points.	
6	Hassles and highlights	Write words which identify likely reader challenges and/or fascinating moguls which emerged.	
7	Next	Finally, write words which contemplate possible implications for the reader and nominate what might come next.	

### Notes

## Create an abstract for a poster

### Poster title

1	Issue	Write gripping words which tell the reader what the poster thesis/argument is and/or what the poster is broadly about.	
2	Question	Write words which simply state what the specific purpose of the poster is.	
3	Strategy	Write words about methodology (research approach) and tell what methods (research procedures) were used upon what and or whom and why.	
4	Found	Write words which encapsulate the most important finding/s to be flagged.	
5	Process key data	Write words which highlight important specific findings and their link/s to theory.	
6	Hassles and 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 and implications for theory and publishing.	

### Notes

## Thesis abstract template

### Thesis title

1	Issue	Write words which tell the examiners what your unique thesis/argument is and what theory your work uniquely traverses and contribute to.	
2	Question & theoretical framework	Write words which tell examiners what the specific issues, or goals, or objectives, or questions, or hypotheses, your thesis explores. Nominate key theories and theoretical approaches to your research.	
3	Strategy	Write words which nominate the methodology and tell what methods were used upon what and or whom and why. Remember to mention ethics.	
4	Found	Write words which encapsulate overall finding/s and their relationship to theory.	
5	Process key data	Write words which highlight the most important general and specific findings and their links to theory and the thesis argument.	
6	Hassles and 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 as well as theoretical consequences of the research.	

### Notes



## Creating your own abstract for a workshop or continuing education event

### Workshop title, date, time and venue

1	Issue	Write words which tell the reader what the workshop will be about	
2	Benefits	Write words which tell potential participants what they will gain from participation. Tell them who should register for the event and why they should do so.	
3	Strategy	Write words which tell potential participants about how the workshop will be run and by whom. Tell them positives about the venue.	
4	Trimmings	Write words which tell participants what they will be able to leave with. Tell them about the venue, notes, catering and parking. Remember to mention costs, often!	
5	Next	Finally, write words which broadcast likely future events and the imperative of registering NOW!	

### Notes