How to write a good abstract for a scientific paper or conference presentation

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Abstract

Abstracts of scientific papers are sometimes poorly written, often lack important information, and occasionally convey a biased picture. This paper provides detailed suggestions, with examples, for writing the background, methods, results, and conclusions sections of a good abstract. The primary target of this paper is the young researcher; however, authors with all levels of experience may find useful ideas in the paper.

Keywords: Abstract, preparing a manuscript, writing skills

INTRODUCTION

This paper is the third in a series on manuscript writing skills, published in the Indian Journal of Psychiatry. Earlier articles offered suggestions on how to write a good case report,[1] and how to read, write, or review a paper on randomized controlled trials.[2,3] The present paper examines how authors may write a good abstract when preparing their manuscript for a scientific journal or conference presentation. Although the primary target of this paper is the young researcher, it is likely that authors with all levels of experience will find at least a few ideas that may be useful in their future efforts.

The abstract of a paper is the only part of the paper that is published in conference proceedings. The abstract is the only part of the paper that a potential referee sees when he is invited by an editor to review a manuscript. The abstract is the only part of the paper that readers see when they search through electronic databases such as PubMed. Finally, most readers will acknowledge, with a chuckle, that when they leaf through the hard copy of a journal, they look at only the titles of the contained papers. If a title interests them, they glance through the abstract of that paper. Only a dedicated reader will peruse the contents of the paper, and then, most often only the introduction and discussion sections. Only a reader with a very specific interest in the subject of the paper, and a need to understand it thoroughly, will read the entire paper.

Thus, for the vast majority of readers, the paper does not exist beyond its abstract. For the referees, and the few readers who wish to read beyond the abstract, the abstract sets the tone for the rest of the paper. It is therefore
the duty of the author to ensure that the abstract is properly representative of the entire paper. For this, the abstract must have some general qualities. These are listed in Table 1.

### Table 1
General qualities of a good abstract

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## SECTIONS OF AN ABSTRACT

Although some journals still publish abstracts that are written as free-flowing paragraphs, most journals require abstracts to conform to a formal structure within a word count of, usually, 200–250 words. The usual sections defined in a structured abstract are the Background, Methods, Results, and Conclusions; other headings with similar meanings may be used (e.g., Introduction in place of Background or Findings in place of Results). Some journals include additional sections, such as Objectives (between Background and Methods) and Limitations (at the end of the abstract). In the rest of this paper, issues related to the contents of each section will be examined in turn.

### Background

This section should be the shortest part of the abstract and should very briefly outline the following information:

1. What is already known about the subject, related to the paper in question
2. What is not known about the subject and hence what the study intended to examine (or what the paper seeks to present)

In most cases, the background can be framed in just 2–3 sentences, with each sentence describing a different aspect of the information referred to above; sometimes, even a single sentence may suffice. The purpose of the background, as the word itself indicates, is to provide the reader with a background to the study, and hence to smoothly lead into a description of the methods employed in the investigation.

Some authors publish papers the abstracts of which contain a lengthy background section. There are some situations, perhaps, where this may be justified. In most cases, however, a longer background section means that less space remains for the presentation of the results. This is unfortunate because the reader is interested in the paper because of its findings, and not because of its background.

A wide variety of acceptably composed backgrounds is provided in Table 2; most of these have been adapted from actual papers.[4–9] Readers may wish to compare the content in Table 2 with the original abstracts to see how the adaptations possibly improve on the originals. Note that, in the interest of brevity, unnecessary content is avoided. For instance, in Example 1 there is no need to state “The antidepressant efficacy of desvenlafaxine (DV), a dual-acting antidepressant drug, has been established…” (the unnecessary content is italicized).
Methods

The methods section is usually the second-longest section in the abstract. It should contain enough information to enable the reader to understand what was done, and how. Table 3 lists important questions to which the methods section should provide brief answers.

Table 3
Questions regarding which information should ideally be available in the methods section of an abstract

Carelessly written methods sections lack information about important issues such as sample size, numbers of patients in different groups, doses of medications, and duration of the study. Readers have only to flip through the pages of a randomly selected journal to realize how common such carelessness is.

Table 4 presents examples of the contents of acceptably written methods sections, modified from actual publications.[10,11] Readers are invited to take special note of the first sentence of each example in Table 4: each is packed with detail, illustrating how to convey the maximum quantity of information with maximum economy of word count.

Results

The results section is the most important part of the abstract and nothing should compromise its range and quality. This is because readers who peruse an abstract do so to learn about the findings of the study. The results section should therefore be the longest part of the abstract and should contain as much detail about the findings as the journal word count permits. For example, it is bad writing to state “Response rates differed significantly
between diabetic and nondiabetic patients.” A better sentence is “The response rate was higher in nondiabetic than in diabetic patients (49% vs 30%, respectively; \( P<0.01 \)).”

Important information that the results should present is indicated in Table 5. Examples of acceptably written abstracts are presented in Table 6; one of these has been modified from an actual publication.[11] Note that the first example is rather narrative in style, whereas the second example is packed with data.

**Table 5**
Information that the results section of the abstract should ideally present

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information that the results section of the abstract should ideally present</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The number of patients who completed the study.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The results of the analysis of the primary objectives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The results of the analysis of the secondary objectives.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 6**
Examples of the results section of an abstract

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Examples of the results section of an abstract</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Three patients withdrew consent during week 1, all the rest completed the RCT course. An intent-to-treat analysis (n=20) showed a significant 15% decrease in Hamilton Rating Scale for Depression (HAM-D) scores by a mean of 3.4 points (95% confidence interval: 0.7 to 6.1). Most of the improvement was independent of the HAM-D improvement, and improvement in CA did not differ significantly between patients with low vs. normal scores of depression. The CAPS response rate was 70%, no patients relapsed. In complete remission (n=17), mean improvements were 49% and 59% on CA and HAM-D, respectively, and the response rate was 82%. Treatment gain was maintained at a 6-month follow-up. No unexpected adverse effects were associated with treatment.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**CONCLUSIONS**

This section should contain the most important take-home message of the study, expressed in a few precisely worded sentences. Usually, the finding highlighted here relates to the primary outcome measure; however, other important or unexpected findings should also be mentioned. It is also customary, but not essential, for the authors to express an opinion about the theoretical or practical implications of the findings, or the importance of their findings for the field. Thus, the conclusions may contain three elements:

1. The primary take-home message
2. The additional findings of importance
3. The perspective

Despite its necessary brevity, this section has the most impact on the average reader because readers generally trust authors and take their assertions at face value. For this reason, the conclusions should also be scrupulously honest; and authors should not claim more than their data demonstrate. Hypothetical examples of the conclusions section of an abstract are presented in Table 7.
MISCELLANEOUS OBSERVATIONS

Citation of references anywhere within an abstract is almost invariably inappropriate. Other examples of unnecessary content in an abstract are listed in Table 8.

As already mentioned, the abstract is the only part of the paper that the vast majority of readers see. Therefore, it is critically important for authors to ensure that their enthusiasm or bias does not deceive the reader; unjustified speculations could be even more harmful. Misleading readers could harm the cause of science and have an adverse impact on patient care.[12] A recent study,[13] for example, concluded that venlafaxine use during the second trimester of pregnancy may increase the risk of neonates born small for gestational age. However, nowhere in the abstract did the authors mention that these conclusions were based on just 5 cases and 12 controls out of the total sample of 126 cases and 806 controls. There were several other serious limitations that rendered the authors’ conclusions tentative, at best; yet, nowhere in the abstract were these other limitations expressed.

As a parting note: Most journals provide clear instructions to authors on the formatting and contents of different parts of the manuscript. These instructions often include details on what the sections of an abstract should contain. Authors should tailor their abstracts to the specific requirements of the journal to which they plan to submit their manuscript. It could also be an excellent idea to model the abstract of the paper, sentence for sentence, on the abstract of an important paper on a similar subject and with similar methodology, published in the same journal for which the manuscript is slated.

Footnotes
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REFERENCES