



An abstract summarizes the contents of your paper, reporting "...only the four or five most important concepts, findings, or implications" (APA 13). Students often write abstracts of their own essays or published articles for their classes, but they also write them as academic conference and grant proposals. Word count is limited, so refer to the guidelines provided by the organization requesting the abstract (abstracts for APA-formatted papers are limited to 120 words). While writing it is helpful to ask yourself, "What is my paper about?" or, "What does my presentation do?" The answer to this question provides the contents of your abstract.

## **Use Key Words and Phrases**

Using key words and phrases in your abstract immediately orientates readers to the paper's contents and lets them know whether your paper is relevant to their purposes. Key words in an abstract also "bump" an article to the top of a database search result list, because database software scans key terms in article abstracts to match the searcher's key terms.

## **Five Qualities of An Abstract**

Abstracts should be:

1. Accurate
  - Contains only information that appears in your paper.
  - The APA recommends using the paper's headers as a guide to writing the abstract.
2. Self-contained
  - Avoids abbreviations and acronyms and give names of authors cited. This will cause databases to pull up the abstract in search results.
3. Concise and specific
  - Contains sentences with the maximum amount of information possible while being brief.
  - Uses the active voice.
  - Includes the thesis and findings.
4. Nonevaluative
  - Reports on the paper's contents; it does not continue the paper's argument or add to it.
5. Coherent and readable
  - Written from the third person perspective, not the first person ("I").
  - The APA recommends using the active voice because it increases the number of verbs while reducing their wordier noun equivalents, as often found in passive constructions (APA 12-4).

## **What to Include in An Abstract**

Different types of abstracts have their own requirements, so the following is a general description.

Depending on the type of abstract you are writing, include the topic or problem under investigation, the thesis, and research or data used. For scientific abstracts, include the data collection methodology and findings; for the humanities, include the logical structure or theoretical framework you use for your argument as well as implications of your findings or the general importance of your argument.

## Abstracts Continued...

Whether you're abstracting your own paper or a published article, reading it for the purpose of abstracting it requires looking for important ideas and key terms to include (they often appear in the introduction and conclusion). Highlight important sentences and ideas that you can later re-phrase in your own words. Deciding which ones to use is a later step, so highlight all of them. Your first draft might exceed the word count, so you will have to prioritize your findings and condense your language to meet the word count. A writing consultant's help can be especially useful at this stage.

Reference: American Psychological Association. *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2001.