

Writing abstracts

UNIKE - Universities in the Knowledge Economy

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To start with:

- Main principles:
 - Good writing is simple writing
 - Clarity of writing and reasoning are essential (one sentence = one idea)
 - Focus on what's important; throw away the non-essential
 - Objective of scientific writing: make questions that are relevant for the audience and provide answers

- Things to do:
 - Find *hot* research topics, from a scientific and social point of view
 - To find them: read a lot of academic books and journals, watch and listen to the news, listen to the common people
 - To find them: participate in conferences, discuss with colleagues, think about how research can be useful to other people

What is an abstract?

- The abstract is a summary of the main features of the paper (in 200-350 words, maximum 3 paragraphs for papers, sometimes longer for conferences). Therefore, it should make clear:
 - What is known and unknown about the subject (should be a short section)
 - What was done and how, focusing on distinctiveness of this approach (this should be a bit longer)
 - What are the results and their relevance (this should be the longest section of the abstract)

- While an abstract is usually the second thing that gets read, just after the title, an abstract for a conference and an abstract for a paper are usually written at very different moments:
 - Often, the abstract for a conference is the first thing to get written, as the conference is still months away, the presentation frequently deals with ongoing work, and conferences are a fine place get feedback on what we're doing;
 - Very differently, the abstract for a paper is often the last thing that gets written before the paper is submitted (suggested sequence for writing papers: methods, results, introduction, discussion, conclusion, title, abstract).

- While an abstract for a conference is often the only thing that you submit to conference organisers, a paper abstract is framed within a much larger piece of work. While it is unlikely that your paper will be rejected because the abstract needs reworking, it is quite possible that your presentation might be rejected if the abstract is poor or does not engage clearly with the conference theme
- Of course, getting accepted to conferences is usually far easier than getting accepted for publication...

- Main ideas:
 - Just like in a paper where each of the text sections should 'tell a story' about the research, each of the abstract sentences should also 'tell a story'
 - Write in the present tense and in the active voice
 - Avoid 'filler' words and superfluous info
 - Conference abstracts should have fewer, if any, references/citations and may have more appealing/seductive titles

- The title should:
 - Specify the research theme/problem, using words, concepts and themes similar/identical to those used in the abstract
 - Be concise
 - Be attractive
 - Make clear the relevance of the research
 - It is very useful to write different titles and ask for opinions before making the final choice