Your essential 'how-to' guide to writing good abstracts

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Article abstracts typically say little about what the researcher has discovered or what the key findings are, what they are arguing as a 'bottom line', or what key 'take-away points' they want readers to remember. Here we present a simple 'how-to' guide to writing good abstracts.

Abstracts tend to be rather casually written, perhaps at the beginning of writing when authors don't yet really know what they want to say, or perhaps as a rushed afterthought just before submission to a journal or a conference. Once an abstract exists, authors are also often reluctant to reappraise them, or to ask critically whether they give the best obtainable picture of the work done and the findings achieved. To counteract these problems the checklist below offers a structured set of suggestions for what an abstract should include, and what should be kept to a small presence.

1. How long is the abstract? [Generally it should be 200 words minimum, 350 maximum] Does it have paragraphs? [No more than 2]

How much information does the abstract give about	None	A bit	A lot	Suggested number of words (for a 300 word abstract)
Other people's work and the focus of previous research literature?				No more than 50-60 words
What is distinctive to your own theoryposition or intellectual approach?				At least 50 words
Your methods or data sources/datasets?				From 50 words minimum to 150 maximum
Your bottom-line findings (i.e. what 'new facts' have you found? Or what key conclusions do you draw?				As many words as possible within your limit
The value-added or originality of your work within this field?				At least 30 to 50 words

2. Does the abstract systematically follow the sequence of elements in 2 to 6 above? [good] Or does it have some other sequence? [bad] Is the progression of ideas clear and connected?

3. How many theme/theory words from the article title recur in the abstract? Does the abstract introduce any new theme/theory words, that are not present in the article title? Do the two sets of words fit closely together? [good] or suggest different emphases? [bad]

4. Style points: How many words are wasted on 'This article sets out to prove..' or 'Section 2 shows that…' Is the description of your own research in the present tense? [good] or the future tense?[bad]

5. Look carefully at the 'ordinary language' words in the title. Are they 'filler' words only? In which case, are they needed? If not, do they have a clear and precise meaning or implication that you want your title to express? (Most ordinary language words with substantive content will have multiple meanings).

6. Suppose that you have read on the Web (in a long list of other articles and items) the article title and the first three lines of the abstract. Do they make you want to download the full article? What kind of academics elsewhere will be able to reference this article usefully in their own work, from the information given in the title and abstract alone?

7. Type the whole title (in double quotes " ") into Google Scholar and check against the table below. Then type the

three or four most distinctive or memorable title words separately into the search engine, and check again.

	Full title in quotes	Three or four most distinctive title words
How many items show up?	- None (good). - Many (poor).	- None (bad). - Very few (bad) - Modest number(good) - Lots and lots (bad) - it's an inverted U curve here.
How do most of the other references or items that show up relate to your topic and subject matter?	-Very close (good). -Close (OK). -Remote (bad). -Completely different topic (very bad).	
Does the search show that you are using terms, phrases or acronyms that	- Have the same meaning as you are using (good).- Or have a number of different meanings from your sense (bad)	

Note: Articles have compound identities because the journal title itself often gives many clues to what the work is about. Hence article titles need to be less distinctive than books. It is fine for your title to havesome of the key words used by other authors, but preferably in some distinctive combination with other words. Your title must include some key words likely to be typed into search engines by potential readers.