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The Writer's Workshop

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Preparing a Structured Abstract for Presentation at a Scientific Conference

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The Structured Abstract

Presenting your abstract at a conference provides the opportunity to promote and discuss your research with peers and to present the findings of your research before publication. Ultimately, the aim of a structured abstract for presentation at a scientific conference is to have your paper accepted. Many conferences now involve peer review of abstracts on the basis of identifying scientifically sound research that will convey valuable information at the conference, and which will have the potential to influence the profession or area of research to which the abstract is aligned. If your abstract is accepted for presentation at the conference, your research will have the opportunity to encourage debate, insight and knowledge, all of which will assist in the improvement of your final paper.

Having a clear purpose

Writing a structured abstract for scientific conference presentation is a challenging task. Providing a brief yet interesting synopsis of a research study that may be very large and complex is not easy. However, abstracts that are concise, easy to read, and most importantly, capture the attention of the reader, are far more likely to attract interest from the review committee, than those that are not.

From the author's perspective, writing an abstract in a structured format provides a framework for identifying and reviewing the key areas of the research from start to finish. From a reviewer's perspective, abstracts that are presented in a structured format, assist the task of reviewing (sometimes hundreds) of papers in a more timely and efficient manner.

The abstract cannot include every detail of your study. However, what is important, is the aim of the study, why it is important or innovative, how it was conducted, what was found, and most importantly, what recommendations or implications it has for the future. The presence of theoretical and methodological rigor and a clearly articulated study design that doesn't underestimate or overestimate your study, are vital. The goal is to encourage the reader to want to find out more about the larger study.

Read the Guidelines

As most scientific conferences specify abstract guidelines, which include details about layout, font size, headings etc., it is strongly advisable to read and adhere to those guidelines before submitting your abstract. While this may not seem important to you, it is usually essential to the peer review process, in terms allowing reviewers to make a fair assessment of your work in a timely fashion. It is also worth noting that a poorly presented abstract may form a negative impression with reviewers compared to one that is correctly presented. Making the effort to follow the guidelines will show your commitment, interest and attention to good practice, whereas in not doing so, your abstract may be rejected without review.

Getting started

In general, abstracts are limited to 200 – 300 words (not including Author affiliations). The structured format includes and demonstrates:

- **Title** – Ten to twelve words that capture the relevance and essence of the research
- **Introduction or Background** - Why the research is important
- **Aims or Objectives** – The purpose of your research
- **Methods** - What the research involved
- **Findings or Results**- What the research discovered
- **Conclusion, Summary or Discussion** - What the research implies

The Title

The title should capture and reflect the overall impression of the research by describing the relevance and implications of the research outcomes. Try to avoid lengthy titles by using no more than twelve words.

The Introduction or Background

This section should describe convincingly and concisely, what you have investigated and why the research is important. The first sentence of your introduction should convey the message of how the overall study contributes to that particular field of research. The introduction should also include a brief description of the study's hypothesis or question, aims and ways in which the implications of your findings add to the area of research. It should also demonstrate clearly the context of the study, or

where the research problem originates or is relevant within the national and international context. If the study involved more than one hypothesis or question, focus on the most meaningful part of the research that supported your findings.

Aims or Objectives

Firstly consider the purpose of your research. The aims should clearly identify the hypothesis, question or concept underpinning the research. Explain the problem, concept or question that was being investigated and the basis of your theory or rationale for undertaking the study.

Methods

The methods section is usually brief but should describe how you achieved the aims of your research. This involves a short description of the study design and any underpinning theoretical or conceptual frameworks, the sampling technique(s) used in the study, e.g. qualitative or quantitative, and the method(s) used in the data analysis. You should also include the method of data collection used in the study, e.g. literature review, surveys, focus groups or patient cohorts etc. If the study involved people, provide the sample size, criteria for selection and whether the sample was randomized or non-randomized. Mention the type of data analysis that was employed, and provide the key results. If any statistical or interpretative analysis software programs were used in the data analysis, mention the generic name for the software, not the commercial name. Finally, state if ethics approval was obtained.

Findings or Results

This part of the abstract conveys the results of your study. You should provide a critical synopsis of the findings of the study, using key data to demonstrate the outcomes. Avoid simply citing data, particularly in quantitative studies. What is required is a synthesis of the data and how it answers your research question. Information should flow logically between each of the key findings. Define any weaknesses or strengths identified in your data and conclude with the implications of your findings and their contribution towards the field of research that was investigated.

Conclusion, Summary or Discussion

When you have completed the introduction, aims, methods and findings your conclusion should support the completed framework by summarising the findings and implications. Provide a short explanation of how the findings relate to the aims, and present evidence of the findings from your methods to support the implications of your study and the field of research to which the study is aligned.

Authors

Include the names and affiliations of all authors involved in the study.

Acknowledgments

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Tips

- Submit your abstract on time.
- Submit your abstract to a conference that is appropriate to your area of research.
- Use the past tense, e.g. “Our research demonstrated...” when writing, as mixed tenses create confusion and reduce the quality and flow of your information.
- Consider that you are writing for an audience who has limited knowledge of your research.
- Ask a peer to critically review your final abstract before submission.
- Remember that original research will impress your audience more than research that is simply interpreted as re-inventing the wheel.
- Never be tempted to submit an abstract without results, as no study can ever be complete without results.
- Stay within the word limit.

Finally, accept that your abstract may be rejected as most conferences have a planned program and limited places for the presentation of oral abstracts. To increase your chances, consider submitting your abstract for selection as a poster **or** an oral presentation, if that is an option.

Useful Resources

1. Coad J, Devitt P. Research dissemination: The art of writing an abstract for conferences. *Nurse Education in Practice*. 2006;6(2):112-6.
2. Pierson. How to write an abstract that will be accepted for presentation at a national meeting. *Respiratory care*. 2004;49(10):1206-12.
3. Selvanathan S, Udani R, Udani S, Haylett K. The art of the abstract. *Student BMJ*. 2006 February;14:70-1.
4. Beyea SC, Nicoll LH. Writing and submitting an abstract. *AORN*. 1998;67(1):273-4.

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