

What is in a good conference abstract?

I. What is an abstract?

An abstract is a summary of *completed, or nearly completed research*. A conference abstract describes work that will be presented, sometimes as a report, but sometimes also for feedback. An abstract differs from a proposal (e.g. for funding), which outlines research that *will be carried out* in order to address a gap in knowledge, or an unresolved issue or point of debate.

Abstracts and proposals share some features: both summarize the state of scholarship, and then identify a question, problem, knowledge gap, or point of debate and how work that has been/will be carried out by the author addresses this question (abstract) or will address this question (proposal). In both it is clear how the author's contribution is original research.

If the abstract is for a study that will be carried out between the time of submission and the conference, then the abstract can say that: e.g. This paper will report the results of a study of ... The study seeks to establish whether...

An abstract can be about work in progress, but that work must be to a point where the proposed is able to make an argument and say something original, while also soliciting feedback on the idea.

II. Components:

A good abstract lays out:

- Context/background
- Argument
- Evidence/methodology/approach
- Conclusion (or a hint at a conclusion)
- In humanities subjects the order of the points above sometimes varies.

A good abstract will also:

- Adhere to the word limit, whatever that is.
- Clearly show how the proposed paper will address the conference theme, if it is for a themed conference.

III. The components in detail:

A. Context/background:

- Start with the research question.
- Or summarize the historical/literary/linguistic/archaeological problem.
- Or identify a gap in the scholarship.

B. Argument:

- This can sometimes be framed as the answer to the problem/question posed in the context section.
- It's important to identify the argument. Consider the following:
 - What is new about it and why does it matter?

C. Evidence/methodology/approach:

- What evidence will be used?
- Or does the research involve applying a new approach or new methodology to well-known evidence or an established debate?

D. Conclusion

- Without giving the whole paper away, try to sum up or hint at the conclusion (sometimes the argument statement can do this).
- If you want to hold back on the conclusion, then the abstract should communicate the research question or gap in the scholarship clearly, and should demonstrate how the approach, methodology or evidence being used is original.

IV. Good habits

- A. Get an early start (weeks in advance)
 - If the paper has not yet been written, a conference abstract is a promissory note.
 - Do enough research to determine what the argument is, and whether it is original and viable.
 - Do enough research to be able to frame the context, argument and originality clearly.
- B. Seek feedback from a colleague or supervisor
 - About the topic
 - About the argument
 - About the draft abstract
- C. Be prepared to do a lot of editing.
 - Use academic language.
 - Avoid jargon, passive voice, contractions.
 - Use but do not exceed the word limit.
 - Check for errors in spelling, omitted words and punctuation, especially by reading a printed version of the abstract aloud.
 - Eliminate repetition.
 - Comply with all style requirements and formatting instructions.
- D. The title should spark interest in the paper and be accurate and informative: one can be clever, but avoid being silly.

V. Common pitfalls of abstracts

- A. Wasted words (see IV C above)
- B. Vague, ill-defined or large topic: the topic has to fit into the timeslot:
 - A conference paper is a slice of a larger work.
 - Only one idea can be thrashed out in 20 minutes.
- C. The abstract promises more than can be achieved in a 20-minute paper. Sometimes it helps to think about the endpoint when writing the abstract.
 - A 20-minute paper is about 8-9 pages (2000-2500 words), double-spaced with 12pt font. That limits the topic.
 - An effective 20-minute paper will only have around 10-12 powerpoint slides if they are being used well (for illustrations, sources and quotations, but not as lecture notes).

VI. The most common pitfall of papers.

- A. The paper runs over time, or the speaker cuts material from the paper in the middle of delivery to fit to time. This is caused by:
 1. Failure to time the paper text *as well as* speaking to powerpoint slides.
Solution: It's a good idea to write text about the slides into the paper to avoid going over time.
 2. The paper goes over time because the speaker **does not** read from a text but speaks to the slides without a written script. The speaker then does not keep close track of time when speaking to powerpoint slides.
Solution: Practice, have a bullet-pointed script, and know exactly how much time to spend on each slide.

B. Other observations

- A. ASCS is similar to other professional societies in its requirement that abstracts be peer-reviewed and that papers have a clear argument and report the results of original research. ASCS differs from other professional societies in that it gives feedback on abstracts and allows proposers a chance to edit their abstracts and resubmit them.
- B. At ASCS we have noticed that early career scholars, independent scholars and to a lesser extent post-graduate students are more likely to be asked to revise or rewrite their abstracts than established academics. We have provided this guidance on what makes a good abstract as a way of guiding anyone who might need help.