

# AUTHORING AMAZING ABSTRACTS

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# What is an abstract?

An abstract is a concise **summary of a project** (a thesis, research report, performance, service project, etc.). Abstracts are commonly used for:

- Proposing papers or presentations at conferences and symposia
- Publishing scholarly articles
- Applying for grants

(NOTE: This presentation is an adaptation of material found on the UW-Madison Writing Center website regarding the writing of abstracts.)

# What should an abstract contain?

Abstracts in any discipline should contain:

- the project's **background, objective, & rationale**,
- the **methods** used to accomplish the objective,
- the project's **results or products** (or projected results/products if the project is not complete), &
- **conclusions** about the implications of the project.
- See more detail in the following slides.

# Background / objective / rationale

***What is the problem or main issue? Why did you want to do this project in the first place?***

(1-2 sentences)

- Identify the problem you set out to solve or the issue you set out to explore.
  - A research question, a gap in critical attention to a text, a societal concern, etc.

## Background / objective / rationale, cont.

- Explain your rationale or motivation for pursuing the project.
  - The purpose of your study is to solve this problem and/or add to your discipline's understanding of the issue.
- Optional: your thesis or hypothesis
  - Could include it in the Conclusions section.

# Methods

## ***What did you do?***

(1-2 sentences)

- This section of the abstract should explain how you went about solving the problem or exploring the issue you identified as your main objective.

## Methods, cont.

- Exactly what this section will include depends on the type of discipline:
  - **Science/social science research:** a concise description of the process by which you conducted your research.
  - **Service project:** an outline of the kinds of service you performed and/or the process you followed to perform this service.

## Methods, cont.

- **Humanities project:** brief description of any theoretical framework or methodological assumptions.
- **Visual or performing arts project:** an outline of the media you employed and the process you used to implement your project.

# Results / products

## *What did you find?*

- This section of the abstract should list briefly the results or outcomes of the work you have done so far.
- If the project is not yet complete, you may still want to include preliminary results or your hypotheses about what those results will be.

# Conclusions

## *What did you learn?*

- The abstract should close with a statement of the project's implications and contributions to its field.
- It should convince readers that the project is interesting, valuable, and worth investigating further.

# Example:

Jamie Pipke (UW-Milwaukee) / Molecular Characterization of a Hybrid Zone in Mule Deer / Mentor: Emily Latch, Biology

Mule deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*) is comprised of two evolutionarily divergent lineages, mule deer and black-tailed deer. These lineages are morphologically, ecologically, and genetically distinct, yet hybridize readily within a zone of contact along the Cascade Mountain range (Washington/Oregon). Previous investigations have focused primarily on the western side of the contact zone. The objective of this research was to characterize patterns of hybridization within the relatively unexplored eastern side of the contact zone, and combine our data with previous work to create a clearer picture of hybridization across the region. We collected tissue samples from approximately 150 deer on the eastern side of the contact zone, extracted DNA, and used PCR to amplify 11 microsatellite loci for each individual. Genotypes revealed deer from both lineages and many hybrids across the eastern contact zone. Placed in a larger context, these data indicate widespread hybridization across the entire contact zone. These data will help us create a more accurate view of the hybrid zone, with important implications at a broad scale to gain more information about stable hybrid zones in general, and on a smaller scale to learn about the introduction, integration and stability of the species in its natural environments.

(198 words)

## Example, cont.

<b>Background &amp; Rationale:</b> 1-2 sentences	Mule deer ( <i>Odocoileus hemionus</i> ) is comprised of two evolutionarily divergent lineages, mule deer and black-tailed deer. These lineages are morphologically, ecologically, and genetically distinct, yet hybridize readily within a zone of contact along the Cascade Mountain range (Washington/Oregon). Previous investigations have focused primarily on the western side of the contact zone. The objective of this research was to characterize patterns of hybridization within the relatively unexplored eastern side of the contact zone, and combine our data with previous work to create a clearer picture of hybridization across the region. (4 sentences)
<b>Methods:</b> 1-2 sentences	We collected tissue samples from approximately 150 deer on the eastern side of the contact zone, extracted DNA, and used PCR to amplify 11 microsatellite loci for each individual. (1 sentence)
<b>Results:</b> 2-3 sentences	Placed in a larger context, these data indicate widespread hybridization across the entire contact zone. (1 sentence)
<b>Conclusions:</b> 1-2 sentences	These data will help us create a more accurate view of the hybrid zone, with important implications at a broad scale to gain more information about stable hybrid zones in general, and on a smaller scale to learn about the introduction, integration and stability of the species in its natural environments. (1 sentence)

# Example, creative project abstract

FILM: Lauren Engley (Mentor: Prof. Ivana George, Art)

“Uncovering Demons: A Photographic Exploration of Sleep Paralysis”

Sleep paralysis is a condition in which the body falls asleep before the mind does, giving way to vivid, terrifying hallucinations while the sleeper is unable to move, speak, or breathe. By using the process of compositing, or merging more than one photograph on a single frame I intend to highlight the unusual symptoms of sleep paralysis through art. Furthermore I intend to utilize the knowledge I will gain to create a series of photographs that expressively demonstrate the debilitating effects of sleep paralysis. . . . As a photographer, I believe the compositing technique is the most effective way of visually representing this deeply disturbing experience. This project will culminate in a series of 15 images. Each image will visually express an episode of sleep paralysis, including the common symptoms and specific examples from actual sleep-paralysis experiences.

# More examples:

[https://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/presentations\\_abstracts\\_examples.html](https://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/presentations_abstracts_examples.html)

# What should NOT be in an abstract?

The abstract is a **description of your *project***.

It should **not** contain:

- a description of your topic (what you're doing the project *on*),
- autobiographical information on *you* or how you got involved in the project, or
- a play-by-play description of how the project unfolded.

## Examples of what NOT to include:

- Autobiographical information on *you* or how you got involved in the project:

“The summer of 2014 I was able to travel abroad to London to study the methods of the artist Gustave Dore, specifically print work in the book *London: A Pilgrimage*. This traveling experience has cemented my fascination with printmaking. While traveling abroad I ... “

## Examples of what NOT to include, cont.

- A description of your *topic*:  
“The sediment deposited at the end of a retreating ice sheet records both the processes at the time of deposition and links these processes to those of original erosion and sediment transport. These records can be found along the length of the recessional moraines through changes in deposited sediments. The sediment of the deposited material provides accessible and easily identifiable sample to tie the source, its transport path, and the final sink together. As the Lake Michigan lobe of the Laurentide Ice sheet retreated from its Wisconsin maximum, it deposited multiple moraines, including the Lake Border Morainic sequence in southeastern Wisconsin and northeastern Illinois. ...”

# How concise do I need to be?

- UW System Symposium for URSCA:
  - <https://www.uwgb.edu/uw-system-symposium/>
  - Maximum 1600 characters (250-300 words)
- National Council on Undergraduate Research:
  - [http://www.cur.org/what/events/students/ncur/2019/ncur\\_2019\\_abstract\\_guidelines/](http://www.cur.org/what/events/students/ncur/2019/ncur_2019_abstract_guidelines/)
  - Maximum 300 words

# How to be concise

- Follow the guidelines provided:
  - Word or character count
  - Suggested number of sentences for each part
- Look for unnecessary adjectives or other modifiers that do not directly contribute to a reader's understanding of your project.
- Look for places where you repeat yourself, and cut out all unnecessary information.

# What stylistic techniques should I use?

- **Avoid jargon.** Jargon is the specialized, technical vocabulary used for communicating within a specific field.
  - Jargon is not effective for communicating ideas to a broader, less specialized audience. If your audience for your abstract is the latter, pay attention to the following:

# Identifying & correcting jargon

- *Discipline-specific sentence:*

Hostilities will be engaged with our adversary on the coastal perimeter.

- (Note: Even for the discipline, this sentence is so full of jargon as to be unclear.)

*Revised for clarity and a more general audience:*

We will fight on the beaches.

## Stylistic techniques, cont.

- Write the abstract separate from the paper or presentation.
- Don't just cut and paste sentences from your research paper into your abstract.
  - Writing that is appropriate for long papers is often too complicated for abstracts.

## Stylistic techniques, cont.

- Use short, direct sentences.
  - Vary your sentence structure to avoid choppiness.
  - Read your abstract aloud, or ask someone else to read it aloud to you, to see if the abstract is appropriately fluid or too choppy.

## Stylistic techniques, cont.

- Choose active or passive voice.
  - Check with a professor in your field to determine which is more appropriate for your discipline.
  - *Active*: We collected tissue samples
  - *Passive*: Tissue samples were collected

## Stylistic techniques, cont.

- Don't cite sources, figures, or tables, and don't include long quotations.
  - This type of material takes up too much space and distracts from the overall scope of your project.

# Writing process for abstracts

1. Examine good examples of abstracts.
2. Review your project so it's fresh in your mind.
3. Then – without looking at your project – write a rough draft of your abstract.
  - This will help you make sure you are condensing the ideas into abstract form.
4. Seek feedback (see next page).

# What kind of feedback should I seek?

- **Ask a professor in the discipline to read your abstract.**
  - People familiar with work in your field can help you see where you need to say more – or less – and can help with clarity and precision.

## Seeking feedback, cont.

- **Ask a friend or family member to read your abstract.**
  - If you can make your abstract understandable to an intelligent non-specialist, you've probably made it effective for the audience of a standard conference or symposium.

## Seeking feedback, cont.

- **Bring your draft to the UW-Superior Writing Center** (Swenson Hall 1030) to get feedback from a writing consultant.
  - Make an appointment at [www.uwsuper.edu/writingcenter](http://www.uwsuper.edu/writingcenter).
  - Consultations are available in person or online.

# Last, but not least:

- **Proofread your abstract carefully!**
  - Typos and other errors will not improve your chances of being accepted at a conference or having your paper published, and they can be downright embarrassing.

# Sources

- University of Wisconsin-Madison Writing Center website ([http://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/presentations\\_abstracts.html#include](http://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/presentations_abstracts.html#include))
- Printed program from the 14<sup>th</sup> Annual System Symposium for Undergraduate Research & Creative Activity, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 24 April 2015
- UW System Symposia for URSCA 2019 web page
- National Council on Undergraduate Research web page.