

How to Write an Abstract

An abstract is a paragraph that provides an overview of a paper. Abstracts should be between 100 and 200 words long and usually contain a list of keywords at the end to help readers identify the main points of the paper. While abstract requirements differ across academic disciplines, there are two main types of abstracts: humanities abstracts and scientific abstracts. This handout reviews the characteristics of an effective abstract, how to write an abstract for the humanities, and how to write an abstract for the sciences.

Characteristics of an Effective Abstract

While the content of an abstract may vary based on the specific discipline for which it is written, abstracts share several key features and should:

- be 100-200 words in length
- summarize the content or process of the paper; it is not an introduction
- refrain from adding new information not included in the paper
- follow the organization of the paper
- be written after the paper is complete
- include keywords; while not all professors require keywords in abstracts, keywords help readers to identify the main points of the paper in order to find additional articles and papers relevant to their research.

Additionally, once the abstract is written, the following questions will help the writer to proofread and edit it:

1.) Is my abstract clear?

The abstract should be easily understood by a wide audience without too much jargon or technical language.

2.) Is my abstract concise?

The abstract should not be redundant or include too much information.

3.) Is my abstract correct?

The abstract should accurately convey the content of the paper.

Humanities Abstracts

The goal of a humanities abstract is to provide a brief overview of the content of the paper. It is also important when writing an abstract in the humanities that the abstract follows the paper's organization. Additionally, the abstract should be written in third person present tense. When writing an abstract for a humanities paper, there are four components to include:

1.) The topic of the paper

In the first sentence of the abstract, describe the general topic of the paper. For example, "This paper examines women's rights in the 1700s."

2.) The thesis of the paper

The abstract's second sentence should state the thesis of the paper. For example, "This paper argues that although women in the 1700s were not allowed the basic rights given to their male counterparts, artists such as Anne Vallayer-Coster and Jane Austen became beacons of independence, offering females the hope of one day expressing themselves."

3.) The main points of the paper

The remaining sentences of the abstract should detail the main points of the paper in the same order as they are discussed in the paper. For example, the three points of this paper are:

- Comparing and contrasting male and female rights
- Analyzing the success of Anne Vallayer-Coster and Jane Austen
- Discussing the opportunity influential women gave to their female counterparts

Therefore, the abstract should have a sentence summarizing each point in the same order.

4.) Keywords

To determine the keywords of the paper, consider the topic of the paper and the specific points of the thesis. For example, keywords for the paper discussed above might be: women's rights, 1700s, Anne Vallayer-Coster, and Jane Austen.



Example Abstract for the Humanities

The first sentence provides an overview of the topic of the paper.

The second sentence states the thesis of the paper.

The keywords are typed on the next line after the abstract with 'Keywords' italicized.

Abstract

This paper examines two largely overlooked characters in Tennessee Williams' plays: Gutman from *Camino Real* and Boss Finley from *Sweet Bird of Youth*. This paper argues that Gutman is ultimately the more sinister and powerful authority figure because Williams created him during the height of the anti-communist movement, which threatened Williams personally. While both characters share several similarities, such as maintaining their power through the division of those beneath them, Gutman and Boss Finley have striking differences. Boss Finley depends on his image to sustain his authority, which makes his power fragile, but Gutman maintains his authority through brute force, making him a nearly omnipotent authority figure. This paper also examines the endings of both plays and the historical context during which Williams wrote them, which suggests why Gutman is more sinister than Boss Finley. Williams did not have personal investment in the Civil Rights Movement, which was ongoing as he wrote *Sweet Bird of Youth*, causing him to construct Boss Finley as an authority figure with fragile power. However, anti-communism affected Williams directly as he wrote *Camino Real*, causing him to construct Gutman as having almost unlimited power.

Keywords: Gutman, Boss Finley, Tennessee Williams, *Camino Real*, *Sweet Bird of Youth*, power, authority figures, communism, Civil Rights

Notice the use of 'this paper.' An abstract should be written in third person, present tense.

The remaining sentences summarize the main points of the paper, following its organization.

Scientific Abstracts

A scientific abstract's goal is to inform the reader about the process and purpose of the experiment performed by the writer. Furthermore, scientific abstracts are written in past tense passive voice. For example, the sentence, "I poured the substrate into the mixture," should be written as "The substrate was poured into the mixture."

There are five questions that need to be addressed to provide enough information about the process and purpose of the experiment. The answers to these questions will then form the abstract.

1.) What did you do, and why did you do it?

This is the first sentence of the abstract. For example, "A frog was dissected" (what you did) "to study the intestines of a frog" (why you did it).

2.) How did you do it?

The following one to two sentences of the abstract should detail the steps of the experiment or procedure. For example, "First, the frog was cleaned, and a scalpel was used to cut the frog. After cutting, the organs were removed and identified."

3.) What did you find?

The subsequent one to two sentences should report the results of the raw data obtained from the experiment. For example, "It was found that the frog had a healthy liver, heart, and intestines."

4.) What does this mean?

In the next one to two sentences, answer this question to give an interpretation of the raw data. For example, "Because the frog had all the expected organs, and none were deformed or in poor condition, it can be concluded that the frog was healthy before its death."

5.) Why should the reader care?

The goal of the final sentence of the abstract is to inform the reader why the experiment or procedure is important. For example, "By dissecting the frog and inspecting the organs for damage, it can be concluded that dissections are a concrete way to determine the health of a frog before its death."

Example Abstract for the Sciences

Abstract

Water, fresh pineapple juice, and canned pineapple juice were added to gelatin to study the effect of the enzyme, Bromelain. First, 3 mL of warm gelatin was put in three test tubes, and then 2 mL of water was added to the first test tube, 2 mL of fresh pineapple juice was added to the second, and 2 mL of canned pineapple juice was added to the third. The test tubes were then placed on ice for ten minutes. [It was found that the canned pineapple juice and the water solidified, but the fresh pineapple juice did not. The lack of solidification of the test tube with fresh pineapple juice indicates the presence of Bromelain in the solution.] By performing this experiment, it can be concluded that fresh pineapple juice contains bromelain, an enzyme that breaks down the proteins in gelatin.

Keywords: enzymes, Bromelain, gelatin, pineapple juice

The first sentence explains what was done and why.

Notice the use of passive voice throughout the abstract

These two sentences describe the steps of the experiment.

These two sentences state the results of the experiment followed by the significance of the results.

The last sentence states the 'so what' of the procedure.

The keywords are typed on the line after the abstract with 'Keywords' italicized.

Additional Resources

Tutoring Services offers individual appointments and a walk-in Writing Center. To book an appointment or inquire about the Writing Center hours, contact Tutoring Services at the Locust Grove Campus at (540) 423-9148 or the Fredericksburg Area Campus at (540) 891-3017. To view additional writing resources, please visit our website at www.germannna.edu/tutoring.