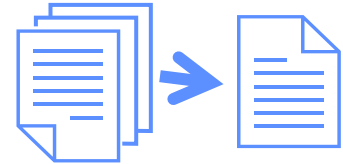# WRITING AN ABSTRACT

WHAT IS AN ABSTRACT?

The abstract can be the most important part of a written report, article, or research paper. Its purpose is to provide a brief, high-level overview of the aims, outcomes, and significance of the work presented, thus giving readers a clear picture of the project's scope and relevance.

In published work, it is the abstract that is most widely read and typically readers will decide to look for further detail based on this summary. Therefore, it is important that the abstract is clear, concise, and written to *stand on its own legs*, almost acting as an alternative to reading the report itself.

HOW IS AN ABSTRACT DIFFERENT TO AN INTRODUCTION?

Unlike an introduction section, which has the purpose of providing context, some background information, and a thesis statement, abstracts function as a standalone summary of the aims, outcomes, and significance of the work presented. While abstracts are usually very brief (only 100–250 words), they should contain all the information required for a reader to understand the entire report at a high-level without having to read it in detail.

Usually an abstract includes:

- A brief **introduction** to the topic and an explanation of its broader significance;
- A statement of the **project aims** or **objectives**;
- An indication of the **methods** or **approaches** used for data collection and analysis; and
- A summary of the **key findings** and a brief comment on their future implications.

TIPS FOR WRITING A STRONG ABSTRACT

Here are five useful tips when writing an abstract that will help to give readers a clear picture of the project's scope and relevance.

TIP 1: WRITE THE ABSTRACT LAST

It can be difficult to summarise something that hasn't yet been written. Once the structure and detail of a study or research project has been fully developed it will be easier to write a short, succinct, and accurate paragraph in summary. One way to begin writing this summary is to mark key details throughout the report, including objectives, topic sentences of the discussion, and major outcomes. These can then be collated in a logical order and used as a guide to write the abstract.

TIP 2: AVOID UNNECESSARY DETAIL

Abstracts are paragraphs of only a few words (100–250), so it is important to leave out any detail that is unnecessary. If the reader is interested to know more, they will simply read the report for greater depth.

Make sure to leave out:
- Background information that is too detailed and lengthy (simply include a short snippet to give context and indicate significance);
- Details about methods and procedures that are not the focus of the project aims and outcomes; and
- Any information or interpretation of data that does not appear in the report itself.

TIP 3: MAKE EVERY WORD COUNT

The abstract is not a place for lengthy explanations or a lot of words. When editing the abstract, cut down sentences that are too long and combine and summarise ideas where possible. Brevity is key in this section and every word that makes it into the final edited abstract must have a purpose.

Make sure to:

- **Summarise** rather than evaluate key information;
- Make **specific statements** and avoid phrases that do not convey important information;
- Write with an **active voice,** such as "the dog *bit* the man", rather than a passive voice, such as "the man *was bitten by* the dog"; and
- Select words for **conciseness** instead of using many, such as "cut ~~out~~ unnecessary words" and "get to the point ~~as quickly as possible~~").
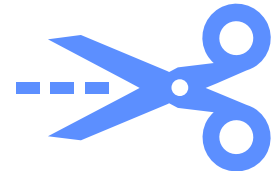
SEE THE GUIDE ON WRITING STYLE

TIP 4: AVOID OVERSTATEMENTS, HYPERBOLE, AND RHETORIC

It is important to indicate aims and objectives in the abstract and to briefly explain why the project is an important piece of work. However, **overstating outcomes or possible implications can mislead the reader** and should be avoided. The use of overstatements, hyperbole, or rhetoric can also have the unintended effect of reducing credibility of the author's work.

TIP 5: THE ABSTRACT SHOULD STAND ON ITS OWN LEGS

As a summary, the abstract should make sense as a short standalone piece of writing. Although it will have far less detail than the report itself, **readers should be able to grasp the major aims, objectives, methods, results, and outcomes of the project without having to read the entire report.** Not only should the abstract *have a leg to stand on* (refer to evidence within the report), it should also *stand on its own legs* (not rely on information elsewhere to make sense).