



ABSTRACTS AS A TOOL FOR SUCCESS

One of the best ways to get started on a revision of your journal article is to write an abstract—something that describes your article's topic and argument. Unfortunately, many scholars see writing an abstract as the last step to publication. In the humanities, writers may never have to write one. But writing an abstract, regardless of whether journals in your field require it or not, is an important step in revising your article, not mere paperwork. More than one authority has noted that "a well-prepared abstract can be the most important paragraph in your article" (APA 1994, 8). Why is writing an abstract so important?

Solving problems. Writing an abstract helps you clarify in your own mind what your article is about, a real aid in drafting and revising. It helps you solve the problems you will have to solve in the article as a whole. Since an abstract is a miniature version of your article—less than 250 words in the humanities and less than 120 in the social sciences—it provides you with the opportunity to distill your ideas and identify the most important. It also serves you as a diagnostic tool: If you cannot write a brief abstract of your article, then your article may lack focus.

Connecting with editors. Having an abstract provides a way for editors to connect with your work without reading your entire article, a real aid in finding an appropriate journal, as we will find in Week 4. With it, editors can encourage potential peer-reviewers to review your article. Since getting reviewers can sometimes be troublesome, this is an important effect of a good abstract.

Getting found. If your abstract is published—and abstracts have grown more common even in humanities journals—you provide a way for scholars to find your work and read it. Keywords and proper nouns embedded in the abstract provide an important path to your article for researchers who would not find your work based on your title alone.

Getting read. Your abstract is essential in convincing scholars to decide to read your article. It communicates the article's importance and demonstrates whether reading it will add to a researcher's knowledge. It helps potential readers decide if your methodology is adequate or your approach is fresh.

Getting cited. Many readers will never go on to read your article, so the most-read piece of your work after the title will be your abstract. In fact, more than one person may cite your article based on reading your abstract alone. And, odd as it sounds, you want to provide an abstract so good that someone could cite your article with accuracy based on your abstract. Although this may seem shocking, there are instances where scholars do this kind of citing. For instance, a scholar writing an article about the efficacy of



the women's environmental movement in Senegal may want to state in passing that scholars have published many more articles about the efficacy of the women's environmental movement in Kenya. If your article is about such Kenyan movements, you want that scholar to be able to add your article to the endnote listing such works even if the scholar has only had access to your abstract online.

INGREDIENTS OF A GOOD ABSTRACT

An abstract is a condensed version of your article, a distillation of the most important information. Several common problems plague even published abstracts. Be sure to avoid the following.

- Don't just introduce your topic; that's what your introduction is for.
- Don't have an abstract that reads like a plan. It shouldn't include statements like "we hope to prove" or "this article tries to analyze" or "this study seeks to." These are okay in grant proposals or conference paper proposals but not in a research article. An article abstract is a report on what you did do, not what you hope to do.
- Don't give a barrage of data without an argument or a conclusion; an abstract should tell (or at least hint at) a story.
- Don't include footnotes or citations (some journals allow exceptions, but this is the general rule).
- Don't include quotations; paraphrase instead.
- Don't include abbreviations, symbols, or acronyms, instead spell out all terms (some journals allow exceptions, but this is the general rule).

Be sure to include as many relevant keywords as possible, since many search engines search by abstract and title alone. Finally, include nothing in the abstract that you need the article to understand.

Good Social Science Abstracts

The basic ingredients of a solid abstract in the social sciences are the following. Indeed, if you can include one sentence on each, you have written a solid and brief abstract.

- State why you embarked on the project—often some reference to a gap or debate in the literature or a persistent social problem.
- State what your project/study was about, the topic of the article.
- State how you did the project, your methodology.
- State what you found through the project, your findings.
- State what conclusions you draw from the project, your argument.
- Some abstracts include recommendations, although this isn't necessary.



Let's look at a real student social science abstract to get a better sense of what's required.

Feliciano, Cynthia. 1999. The Benefits of Biculturalism: Exposure to Immigrant Culture and School Drop Outs among Asian and Latino Youths.

Conventional assimilation theory, which holds that immigrant children enjoy greater educational achievement as they "become American," has begun to be disputed for the children of recent immigrants. *This study* uses data from the 1990 Public Use Microdata Samples to examine how retaining an immigrant culture lowers school drop out rates among eight of the largest Asian and Latino groups in the United States: Vietnamese, Koreans, Chinese, Filipinos, Japanese, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans. Language use, household language, and presence of immigrants in the household are used as measures of exposure to immigrant culture. Overall, *the study found* that these measures have similar effects on these diverse groups: bilingual students are less likely to drop out than those who speak only English, students in bilingual households are less likely to drop out than those in English-dominant or English-limited households, and students in immigrant households are less likely to drop out than those without immigrants in their households. *These findings suggest that*, contrary to straight-line assimilation theory, those who enjoy the greatest educational success are not those who have abandoned their ethnic cultures and are most acculturated. Rather, bicultural youths who can draw resources from both the immigrant community and mainstream society appear to be best situated to enjoy educational success. (italics added)

Note how skillfully the student writes this abstract. She summarizes the literature in one sentence. In that sentence, she manages not only to explain why she is doing the study, but also to give a definition of the theory that her research works against. She summarizes her study in two sentences, describing the methods and the population. She carefully details all three of the study's findings. Finally, she states her conclusions (and argument) elegantly and convincingly. (Note that her regular use of the passive voice has not weakened the abstract.) Since the abstract is a bit long for many journals (at 209 words), it was shortened upon publication (to 150 words).⁶

Here is another good social science abstract, one that a journal published.

Simon, Patrick. 2003. "France and the Unknown Second Generation: Preliminary Results on Social Mobility." *International Migration Review* 37, no. 4 (Winter): 1091-1120.

The growing concern about the future of the offspring of immigrants in France has prompted the rise of a "second generation question." Access of "new second generations" (i.e., those born



from the waves of immigration of the 1950s and 1960s) to the job market and their visibility in social and cultural life have challenged the "French model of integration." Moreover, the ebbing of social mobility in the France of the 1970s led to a process of social downgrading which may affect significantly the second generation due to their social background and the persistence of ethnic and racial discrimination. It is thus important to investigate what kind of social mobility is actually experienced by people of immigrant ancestry, and what could hinder their mobility. This article uses the data from a new survey, the Enquete Histoire Familiale (family history survey) conducted in 1999 and based on 380,000 individuals, which analyzes the positions of second generations of Turkish, Moroccan and Portuguese origin. We argue that they follow different paths: a reproduction of the positions of the first generation; a successful social mobility through education; or a mobility hindered by discrimination.

The above abstract gives a full sense for the article and doesn't withhold information.

Some social science abstracts proceed slightly differently than the one above. They start with one or two sentences giving the topic, another sentence giving the argument, and two or three sentences providing the results or proofs. Whatever their order, these ingredients are essential.

Good Humanities Abstracts

Humanities journals are less likely to publish abstracts, but they are still a useful tool in thinking through your article and getting it through the peer review process. In the humanities, published abstracts often tend to omit information on the methodology or findings. The order of information also tends to be looser than in social science abstracts. The basic ingredients of a solid abstract in the humanities can include the following.

- Context—that is, information on the historical period, the geographic region, the social conditions surrounding the human creations being investigated
- Subject—the literary or artistic works being discussed, their creators and dates
- Claim for significance—announcement about the uniqueness of the subject or your approach to it
- Theoretical framework—often more suggested than stated, the theory you are using to discuss the subject, such as feminist or psychoanalytic approaches
- Argument—what your analysis of the subject revealed about the subject, current approaches to the subject, or society
- Proofs—your evidence for your argument about the subject, or the elements of the subject that you analyze (such as textual passages)



Below is a version of a humanities abstract that appeared in the journal I managed.

Berg, Charles Ramírez. 2003. "Colonialism and Movies in Southern California, 1910-1934." *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 28, no. 1 (spring): 75-96.

Once the film industry moved to Los Angeles from the East Coast in the 1910s, Hollywood became the source of the negative stereotyping of Latinos in mainstream American cinema. This article argues that the anti-Mexican American discourse in Southern California during the motion picture industry's formative years provided the impetus for those derogatory film images. In doing so, the essay synthesizes two bodies of literature that rarely comment on one another: early Hollywood studio history and works treating the Mexican American experience in Southern California. Three main Southern California social elements that shaped the anti-Mexican American discourse in films are discussed: (a) the ostracizing of Mexican Americans to East Los Angeles at the same time that the movie companies were flocking to the opposite side of town; (b) the social, economic, and political climate that resulted in anti-Mexicano attitudes; and (c) the view of Mexico as a playground for the United States.

These are just a few examples of some good abstracts in the social sciences and the humanities. Many others exist, and it is a good idea to study published abstracts to get a sense for how they work in your field.

Later in the week, you will get a chance to draft and revise your own abstract.

GETTING STARTED ON YOUR ARTICLE REVISION

Day 1: Hammering Out Your Topic

On the first day of your writing week, you should read the workbook up to this page and answer all the questions posed in the workbook up to this point. You should also use the daily writing chart to schedule your writing time in advance and then start tracking when you actually wrote.

Then your task is to refine the topic of your article. You should have picked a paper by now, but if you are still debating between two, pick both for this assignment. Going over them with another person will help you to pick the right one.

Since this is a social assignment, you will need someone to work with. If you are working through the workbook on your own, pick up the telephone and call an academic friend. You will need to talk out loud with someone to complete this task.



Describe. Tell your chosen confidant about your article. Start with, "My article is about" or "I am writing . . ." and then follow with a description of your work. Try to give the other person a real sense for your topic, approach, findings, and argument. When you have finished describing the article, ask him or her if what you said was clear, and if he or she has any questions.

Summarize. Once the person has given you comments, try to give your description in a more succinct form. Distill your article into no more than two or three sentences, as if you were doing a brief presentation of your work during an introduction at a conference or in the elevator to a professor you just met. Then ask him or her to repeat back what you said, to make sure that it is clear.

Write. Once you've done this, pick up a pen and use the chart below to write one sentence starting "My article is about" or "I am writing . . ." (If you are on the telephone, don't wait to hang up. Do it right then while you are still on the telephone. If you want, you can ask your interlocutor to write down one sentence about your article as well.)

My Article Is About . . .

Were you able to do this exercise? How did it make you feel to say what you are doing aloud? Did your statement change? How?

What I Learned by Doing This Exercise

What did you just do? You wrote a first draft and then revised what you wrote. By interacting with another person, you got clarity on your topic and started to frame that on paper. The point of this exercise is to get you started writing and to show that both writing and editing are completely natural.