PRCO304: Writing your abstract

The abstract should be a *stand-alone, 3rd-person present tense description of the contents of the report*.

Here is an example (completely made up):

> This report describes a software development project to develop a new hotel information system for the Lawns Hotel, Brighton, intended to provide improved customer service.
>
> The report commences with an investigation into the client and their business needs, and then goes on to articulate the project objectives.   The results of research into commercially available hotel systems are presented, as is an overview of the requirement elicitation process carried out with the client.   Outline user requirements are then presented, as is a high level design of the intended system.
>
> The development process was incremental with development increments addressing customer facing functionality, communication between internal functional units, and telephone system interoperability; the development technologies were PHP and MySQL.   A description of this process and its deliverables is presented, followed by an overview of the system testing undertaken.   An evaluation of the system against the client's requirements is shown to demonstrate that the final deliverable meets all but one of the core requirements.
>
> A final project post-mortem is then presented, which indicates that the various approaches taken within the project were indeed appropriate, with the exception of the choice of CASE tool, which proved to be slightly cumbersome to use.
>
> Details of project management issues and interim project deliverables are presented in various appendices.

Try not to allow your abstract to become too long.

Occasionally you might find yourself making statements about the project rather than the report (and thereby slipping into the past tense).   So long as these aspects of the project are described in the report … don't worry about it: trying to be too rigid can lead to cumbersome wording.

Some things that you'd certainly expect to find in your final report – and hence which should probably be mentioned in your abstract:
* The *immediate* context/motivation/background of the project
* The fundamental problem you're trying to solve
* The approach that you took
* The fundamental outcome of the project

- Critical evaluation of the project

When you have completed your final report, double check that the abstract still coincides with its contents.

The abstract is supposed to allow someone to decide (having read *just* your abstract) whether they wish to read the whole report.   So the abstract should be able to stand alone. Also, consequently, there should be no citations in the abstract.

The main problems we see perennially with abstracts are:

- Poor English: be concise and to the point.
- Sentences in the abstract don't hang together; they seem to be unrelated to each other.   If the abstract isn't cohesive, what hope is there for the eventual report?
- The use of sentences that really belong in an introduction … the abstract is not the place to describe the *wider* background.
- Use of the wrong tense (often using the future tense).