

3. How to Write an Abstract | Steps & Examples?

1. How to Write an Abstract?

An abstract is a short summary of a longer work (such as a thesis, dissertation or research paper). The abstract concisely reports the aims and outcomes of your research, so that readers know exactly what your paper is about.

Although the structure may vary slightly depending on your discipline, your abstract should describe the purpose of your work, the methods you've used, and the conclusions you've drawn.

One common way to structure your abstract is to use the IMRaD structure. This stands for:

1. Introduction
2. Methods
3. Results
4. Discussion

Abstracts are usually around 100–300 words, but there's often a strict word limit, so make sure to check the relevant requirements.

In a dissertation or thesis, include the abstract on a separate page, after the title page and acknowledgements but before the table of contents.

2. Abstract Example

This paper examines the role of silent movies as a mode of shared experience in the US during the early twentieth century. At this time, high immigration rates resulted in a significant percentage of non-English-speaking citizens. These immigrants faced numerous economic and social obstacles, including exclusion from public entertainment and modes of discourse (newspapers, theater, radio).

Incorporating evidence from reviews, personal correspondence, and diaries, this study demonstrates that silent films were an affordable and inclusive source of entertainment. It argues for the accessible economic and representational nature of early cinema. These concerns are particularly evident in the low price of admission and in the democratic nature of the actors' exaggerated gestures, which allowed the plots and action to be easily grasped by a diverse audience despite language barriers.

Keywords: silent movies, immigration, public discourse, entertainment, early cinema, language barriers.

When to write an abstract

You will almost always have to include an abstract when:

- Completing a thesis or dissertation
- Submitting a research paper to an academic journal
- Writing a book or research proposal
- Applying for research grants

It's easiest to write your abstract last, right before the proofreading stage, because it's a summary of the work you've already done. Your abstract should:

- ✓ Be a self-contained text, not an excerpt from your paper
- ✓ Be fully understandable on its own
- ✓ Reflect the structure of your larger work

Step 1: Introduction

Start by clearly defining the purpose of your research. What practical or theoretical problem does the research respond to, or what research question did you aim to answer?

You can include some brief context on the social or academic relevance of your dissertation topic, but don't go into detailed background information. If your abstract uses specialized terms that would be unfamiliar to the average academic reader or that have various different meanings, give a concise definition.

After identifying the problem, state the objective of your research. Use verbs like "investigate," "test," "analyze," or "evaluate" to describe exactly what you set out to do.

This part of the abstract can be written in the present or past simple tense but should never refer to the future, as the research is already complete.

X This study will investigate the relationship between coffee consumption and productivity.

✓ This study investigates the relationship between coffee consumption and productivity.

Step 2: Methods

Next, indicate the research methods that you used to answer your question. This part should be a straightforward description of what you did in one or two sentences. It is usually written in the past simple tense, as it refers to completed actions.

X Structured interviews will be conducted with 25 participants.

✓ Structured interviews were conducted with 25 participants.

Don't evaluate validity or obstacles here—the goal is not to give an account of the methodology's strengths and weaknesses, but to give the reader a quick insight into the overall approach and procedures you used.

Step 3: Results

Next, summarize the main research results. This part of the abstract can be in the present or past simple tense.

X Our analysis has shown a strong correlation between coffee consumption and productivity.

✓ Our analysis shows a strong correlation between coffee consumption and productivity.

✓ Our analysis showed a strong correlation between coffee consumption and productivity.

Depending on how long and complex your research is, you may not be able to include all results here. Try to highlight only the most important findings that will allow the reader to understand your conclusions.

Step 4: Discussion

Finally, you should discuss the main conclusions of your research: what is your answer to the problem or question? The reader should finish with a clear understanding of the central point that your research has proved or argued. Conclusions are usually written in the present simple tense.

X We concluded that coffee consumption increases productivity.

✓ We conclude that coffee consumption increases productivity.

If there are important limitations to your research (for example, related to your sample size or methods), you should mention them briefly in the abstract. This allows the reader to accurately assess the credibility and generalizability of your research.

If your aim was to solve a practical problem, your discussion might include recommendations for implementation. If relevant, you can briefly make suggestions for further research.

Keywords

If your paper will be published, you might have to add a list of keywords at the end of the abstract. These keywords should reference the most important elements of the research to help potential readers find your paper during their own literature searches.

Be aware that some publication manuals, such as APA Style, have specific formatting requirements for these keywords.

Tips for writing an abstract

It can be a real challenge to condense your whole work into just a couple of hundred words, but the abstract will be the first (and sometimes only) part that people read, so it's important to get it right. These strategies can help you get started.

Read other abstracts

The best way to learn the conventions of writing an abstract in your discipline is to read other people's. You probably already read lots of journal article abstracts while conducting your literature review—try using them as a framework for structure and style.

You can also find lots of dissertation abstract examples in thesis and dissertation databases.

Reverse outline

Not all abstracts will contain precisely the same elements. For longer works, you can write your abstract through a process of reverse outlining.

For each chapter or section, list keywords and draft one to two sentences that summarize the central point or argument. This will give you a framework of your abstract's structure. Next, revise the sentences to make connections and show how the argument develops.

Write clearly and concisely

A good abstract is short but impactful, so make sure every word counts. Each sentence should clearly communicate one main point.

To keep your abstract or summary short and clear:

- ✓ Avoid passive sentences: Passive constructions are often unnecessarily long. You can easily make them shorter and clearer by using the active voice.
- ✓ Avoid long sentences: Substitute longer expressions for concise expressions or single words (e.g., "In order to" for "To").
- ✓ Avoid obscure jargon: The abstract should be understandable to readers who are not familiar with your topic.
- ✓ Avoid repetition and filler words: Replace nouns with pronouns when possible and eliminate unnecessary words.
- ✓ Avoid detailed descriptions: An abstract is not expected to provide detailed definitions, background information, or discussions of other scholars' work. Instead, include this information in the body of your thesis or paper.
- ✓ If you're struggling to edit down to the required length, you can get help from expert editors with Scribbr's professional proofreading services.

Check your formatting

If you are writing a thesis or dissertation or submitting to a journal, there are often specific formatting requirements for the abstract—make sure to check the guidelines and format your work correctly. For APA research papers you can follow the APA abstract format.

Checklist: Abstract

1. The word count is within the required length, or a maximum of one page.
2. The abstract appears after the title page and acknowledgements and before the table of contents.
3. I have clearly stated my research problem and objectives.
4. I have briefly described my methodology.
5. I have summarized the most important results.
6. I have stated my main conclusions.
7. I have mentioned any important limitations and recommendations.
8. The abstract can be understood by someone without prior knowledge of the topic.