

you think the reviewer completely missed the point, your response needs to be intellectual and not emotional. Reviewers are selected for different purposes, such as their expertise in theory, methodology, practice or policy as well as their knowledge of the subject area, and we do not expect them necessarily to agree. Don't try and play one reviewer off against another; deal individually with the substantive issues raised by each.

Often authors write excellent explanations to the Editor in their covering letter about why they could not do or it was inappropriate to do what the reviewer asked, but they do not make any change in the article itself. However, information that provides context, acknowledges a limitation or explains why an alternative approach was not utilised may be helpful and of interest to readers. For example, a reviewer might ask what an analysis by Aboriginality showed. An explanation that there was no field for Aboriginality in the dataset or that the Aboriginal identifier is known to be inaccurate or was missing so frequently that calculation of rates was impossible could be a sentence in the text. Without doing what the reviewers asked, brief additional information added to the manuscript informs the reader by revealing a limitation of the dataset.

A word of warning: adding hundreds of extra words to your article is problematic. Many authors will groan at reviewers' requests for additional information, as Editors usually require a revised article that is not longer than the initial version. We accept that this is very challenging, but the more pages an article occupies, the less room in the Journal there is for other articles, all else being equal, and the fewer papers that can be published. Often the primary author, who laboured through writing the pearls of wisdom, is not the best person to take the machete to their own words; your co-authors should contribute to this stage. Remember, readers appreciate information which is clear and succinct, and where the data to justify the statements made are readily apparent. Just as when an article is first submitted, all authors are expected to have read and agreed to the final manuscript.

Authors who fail to respond to and satisfactorily address all the criticisms raised by every reviewer are likely to get a request for further revision or the Editors may reject the manuscript outright.

It is important to remember that the advantage of peer review is that it reveals methodological flaws and identifies extrapolation and interpretation beyond what is reasonable, based upon the data and evidence. Many of these problems are identified and remedied by the review process. The result is almost always a better paper in terms of its writing, evidence, conclusions and the recommendations that come from that data.

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Writing an abstract: window to the world on your work

Elisabeth Heseltine

Freelance Biomedical Editor, Saint Léon-sur-Vézère, France

The first thing to remember about abstracts, including their titles, is that they are 'up front'. They are by far the most visible part of a paper; they may be the only example of your prose that anyone reads. The first people to see it will be the editors of journals, and they may decide whether to send the paper out for peer review on the basis of the abstract.

Is there a method for writing good abstracts? Well, perhaps not a method – but a few important points should be kept in mind.

Perhaps the easiest way to decide what to put into your abstract is to follow the advice of Sir Austin Bradford Hill (a renowned British epidemiologist).¹ He formulated four basic questions that must be answered in any form of scientific communication:

Why did you start?

What did you do?

What answer did you get?

What does it mean?

These questions reflect the four parts of the paper: the Introduction, the Materials and Methods, the Results and the Discussion. The abstract should answer all four questions, in that order, in the shortest yet most comprehensible way.

First, you need a title, and *ANZJPH* is moving to titles that capture the results of an article rather than pose a question.

Why did you start?

What is the broad context into which your piece of research fits, and what was the question that you set out to answer? It is important to provide some orientation: your readers need some background to judge the importance of the work. Formulating your question clearly can also help orientate you in writing the rest of the paper.

What did you do?

What are the vital elements of your method? The reader must have a broad idea of the kind of method you used and, for instance, the size of the population surveyed. If necessary, the limitations of the method should be mentioned and how you tried to reduce them.

What answer did you get?

What were your major results? Be specific: give both numbers and significance levels, if relevant. Be selective: give only those results relevant to answering the question.

What does it mean?

A short statement giving the answer to the question is all that is needed, with the limitations of your conclusion. An abstract is not the place to discuss broad implications.

ANZJPH uses the structured abstract, with the subtitles Objective, Methods, Results, Conclusion and Implications. The instructions to

authors of journals give a word limit, which differs from journal to journal. It is useful to keep in mind that many databases, including Medline, cut abstracts off at 250 words.

Who is it for?

Abstracts have different functions, depending on where and how they are read. When they appear as part of the paper, that is, with the full text of the article, readers use them to judge whether they are interested in reading further and also to be orientated. Abstracts are not always accompanied by the rest of the text, however. They appear widely on online databases, which are used not only by researchers and practitioners looking for articles to obtain but also by large numbers of people with an interest in public health in countries where the original article may not be available, and where abstracts serve as a substitute for the full article.

To meet the requirements of all these different users, abstracts must be understandable without reference to the text. They must be informative rather than descriptive. They must accurately reflect the content of the article. Both for a reader in a country where a copy of the current issue of a scientific journal is almost unheard of and for the busy editor of the journal, phrases like “The results are discussed in the light of previous findings” stimulate feelings ranging from mild amusement to frustration. What were the results? What do they mean?

Your abstract will probably be read by thousands of researchers and practitioners all over the world, many more people than will ever read the full text. The large majority (more than 80%) will not be native English speakers. What's more, the abstract will be translated into other languages – usually by translators who are not scientists.

Does all this seem like a lot of responsibility for you to bear when writing an abstract? It's easy to face up to: Keep it simple! Write plain, grammatical English, using the correct technical terms but with no jargon (from a mediaeval French word meaning the warbling, twittering and chattering of birds, with the same root as ‘gargle’; i.e. sounds that are meaningless). Avoid pompous sentences and don't use abbreviations unless you really have to.

When should it be written?

Most people find it easiest to write the abstract when the rest of the paper has been fully constructed, each sentence agonisingly and lovingly rounded out. Then, they take the best of those sentences (they abstract, *ab trahere*, to pull out), distribute them artfully and sometimes come to an even more polished conclusion than they did in the paper. Perhaps, just as an exercise, it might be interesting to try at least once to write the abstract first. If you can write your abstract first, you will have done a lot of thinking before setting pen to paper or fingers to the keyboard. Once all that thinking has been done, the text of your whole article will be very much easier to write.

References

1. Hill AB. The reasons for writing. *BMJ* 1965 (20 October), ii (4998), 870.

Correspondence to: Mrs Elisabeth Heseltine, La Jarthe 24290, Saint Léon-sur-Vézère, Dordogne, France;
e-mail: e.heseltine@gmail.com

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What drove us to drink 2 litres of water a day?

Spero Tsindos

*Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, La Trobe University, Victoria;
Department of Dietetics and Human Nutrition, Faculty of Health Sciences, La Trobe University, Victoria*

In 1976, the anthropologist Claude Paque published a paper on the water consumption of Saharan nomads. This paper, *Water consumption in Saharan nomads. A remarkably reduced and constant consumption*, considered the reasons why these tribes drank so little water in one of the world's hottest regions. The adaptability of these nomads is reflective in the water allocation reported by Paque, with it being half the consumption of the Europeans living in the same environment.¹ Given that even in a harsh environment, the consumption of water can be minimal, why do we insist on drinking such large volumes of water every day?

Australian health and dietary authorities currently encourage Australians to consume eight glasses, or two litres, of fluid daily for optimal health.² This has been misinterpreted to mean two litres of water specifically and it has driven a steady growth in the use of bottled water over the years. Drinking water is healthy; it can contribute to weight loss, reduce the consumption of sugary beverages³ and – when consumed out of a bottle – can be healthier still, at least according to the water bottle industry.⁴ Thirty years ago you didn't see a water bottle anywhere, now they appear as fashion accessories. It supports the emergence of a new status;⁵ as May called it, “the new cultural class”.⁶ As tokens of instant gratification and symbolism, the very bottle itself is seen as cool and hip.⁷ Glamour has played a pivotal role. The use of water in weight-loss programs has given added impetus to the notion that drinking large volumes of water a day will help lose weight. This is partly true, but it requires a low-calorie diet in the same way as any other weight-loss program. Research revealed that the inclusion of high volumes of water does nothing more than reduce the appetite.³ Further, Dr Victoria Potter noted that consuming water in food eaten had a greater benefit in weight reduction than avoiding foods altogether.⁸

Heinz Valtin posed the question, “Why do we need to drink eight glasses of water a day?”⁹ In a recent article by Dr Margaret McCartney in the *British Medical Journal*, the notion of needing to drink large volumes of water for health had been reinforced by the National Health Service (NHS) in Britain, without any substantial evidence to support it.¹⁰ There are institutional recommendations in Australia as well, for instance, the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) recommends a similar quantity of fluid to that discussed by Valtin. McCartney further showed that despite the claims of bottled water producers that more water is required, evidence suggests the over-consumption of water, particularly in children, could be detrimental. Both Valtin and McCartney consider the recommendation of eight glasses or two litres of water a day to be driven by vested interests, rather than a need for better health. Even so, from where did this recommendation originally stem?