

Abstracts, Paper Presentation, Session Chairing

What are Abstracts?

An abstract is a concise summary of a larger document—thesis, essay, book, research report, journal publication, etc.—that highlights major points covered in the work, concisely describes the content and scope of the writing, identifies the methodology used, and identifies the findings, conclusions, or intended results.

Why are Abstracts so Important?

For research purposes, an abstract makes it possible for readers to determine the content of a work quickly and decide if the full text should be consulted. With published materials such as journal articles, abstracts are also important tools in an electronic search, based on key words from the body of the text and highlighted in an abstract. A well-written abstract helps others, who may not be studying in your discipline, understand the purpose and value of your work; it should be comprehensible on a basic level to the educated non-expert.

Writing an Abstract

When answering a call for papers a number of factors need to be kept in mind to ensure that your abstract has a good chance of being accepted. Of course, often you have not fully written the presentation before you write the abstract, and so the abstract is often something of a fiction. Still it should be much more than a flimsy claim—it should be a clear statement of your central hypothesis—the central idea that the paper will explain and argue for.

An abstract submitted for a conference paper should do two things:

- Tell conference participants what you are going to say
- Interest them in coming to hear you say it

Elements of a Successful Abstract

A highly condensed article with 2 sentences for Intro, 2 or so for methodology, 2 for results, and 2 for conclusion

- Problem: identify the topic/subject of your paper—the question/problem it raises
- Scope: locate the topic/subject in terms of a field of scholarship—who/what provides the intellectual context for the problem/question the paper raises
- Significance: emphasize your position/argument—your proposition/thesis regarding the question/problem
- Indicate—this is optional—your reasons for undertaking this investigation

Technical and Practical Aspects

- Devise a title that is descriptive and inviting, but make sure it is not too ‘clever’ or obscure
- Ensure that the abstract relates to the conference theme: in a ‘real’ and not contrived way (some conferences are more sticklers than others)
- Use words that are accessible to both specialists and non-specialists
- Plan the abstract as a single paragraph that is unified (i.e., one topic) and coherent (i.e., ideas flow continuously)—two (maybe even three) paragraphs are OK so long as the abstract as a whole is unified/coherent

Dr. Obermeier

- Ensure it meets or is under the specified word length: usually 200-250 words
 - Limit number of references cited in abstract: use only if essential to support your argument
 - Include name, title, organization and contact info, including phone, fax, street address and e-mail
 - Conform to the “house style” of the conference, if specified
 - Edit it for grammar, punctuation, typos, etc.
-
- Look at past abstracts/conference papers to pick up the tone and style of that particular organization’s conferences
 - Run your abstract past someone familiar with both the topic you wish to present and the conference style: such as a university lecturer, work colleague, member of professional society, someone who has presented before at the conference
 - Submit on or before the due date and in the required way: electronically, via e-mail, is usually preferred
 - Ensure computer compatibility.

Paper Presentation Tips

- Stick to the allotted speaking time; bring watch to keep track of time
- Time yourself by reading the paper out loud several times; practice intonation
- Print paper in a larger or bolder font for easier reading
- Scout out the room you will be speaking in, its acoustics, setup, lighting, AV equipment
- Handouts with names, titles, concepts, dates are helpful
- Make eye contact with audience
- Asides can liven up a paper
- Be prepared to deal with interruptions, such as people walking in late or leaving early, sneezing, or otherwise making noises
- Bring water, if you need it

Session Chairing Guidelines

- Introduce the session to the participants and outline the procedure, i.e. questions at the end
- Introduce the speakers, with some info on degrees, publications, research interests, awards, etc.
- Keep time and admonish the speaker to stop if s/he is over the time
- Distribute handouts
- Help with AV equipment
- Keep distractions to a minimum
- Provide water for speaker
- Synthesize connections among the papers, have a question for each speaker in case none comes from the audience, and direct the discussion after papers, possible by asking for questions for each speaker in order