

Elements of an Abstract

An abstract is a summary of a paper or laboratory report. A successful abstract is written according to the following guidelines:

- It should be written concisely and in plain language accessible to the lay reader.
- It should be written with an assumption that the reader is not familiar with the subject.
- It should be clear and complete.
- It should not cite any figures, tables, or sections of the report.
- It should indicate the subject of the report or state the objectives of the experiment in the opening sentences.
- It should be limited to one paragraph (rarely more than 300 words).

Although an abstract is placed at the beginning of a piece of writing, it should only be written once the entire paper is complete to ensure that it accurately reflects the information presented.

Structure of an Abstract

The information in an abstract should be structured and presented in the same order and with the same emphasis as the information in the report. An effective abstract should provide a one- or two-sentence summary for each section of the report that serves to highlight the material covered.

Follow these steps when formulating an abstract:

- Begin an abstract with a brief but specific statement to introduce the report.
- State the main purpose or objective, as well as the hypothesis of the report.
- Describe the important points of the methodology used.
- Provide a summary of the main results, both numerically and qualitatively.
- Summarize the major points from the discussion and conclusion sections. Focus on the points that relate directly to the central hypothesis or argument.
- Use the same word tense for each type of information as in the corresponding section (for example, if the materials and methods section uses the past tense, the abstract should use the past tense when discussing the methodology).

Types of Abstracts

Determine the type of abstract required for the report; an **informative abstract** contains detailed information, while a **descriptive abstract** provides only a brief overview of the report. While informative abstracts may be more common in scientific writing, there are times where a descriptive abstract is more appropriate. Consult your instructor to determine which type is required.

Informative Abstracts

- An informative abstract summarizes the essence of the whole report. This type of abstract must mention each of the main points or parts of the report, providing details and results. Specifically, an informative abstract should:
 - communicate specific information from the report;
 - include the purpose, methods, and scope of the report;
 - provide the report's results, conclusions, and recommendations;
 - never be more than 10% of the length of the original report.

Descriptive Abstracts

- A descriptive abstract is usually more brief than an informative abstract and provides less information. Rather than summarizing the entire report, a descriptive abstract functions more as a 'teaser,' providing a quick overview, which invites the reader to read the whole report. Descriptive abstracts do not usually provide or discuss any results or set out the conclusion or its implications, but are meant only to introduce the subject to readers, who must then read the report to find out an author's results, conclusions, or recommendations. A descriptive abstract:
 - tells readers what information the report contains;
 - includes the purpose, methods, and scope of the report;
 - does **not** provide results, conclusions, or recommendations;
 - is very short, usually under 100 words.