

Abstracts for Empirical Research Papers

an overview

What is an abstract?

The purpose of an abstract is to provide a highly condensed summary of an article or paper. Lengths vary by field, but most abstracts for empirical research papers are between 150 and 250 words. Abstracts serve several important functions within academia and research-based fields:

- Many research databases index only abstracts—not entire research articles. When students or scholars use databases to search literature in their field, they are presented with abstracts, which help them determine relevancy and whether or not to access the full article. This is why, in some disciplines, abstracts are often accompanied by keywords that assist searchers in finding relevant texts.
- When researchers apply to share their research at conferences in their fields, they typically submit an abstract for a presentation, paper, poster, or panel discussion. The committees that accept or decline conference proposals rely heavily on abstracts to determine the relevance, significance, credibility, and fit of the proposed content.
- Abstracts often appear at the beginning of scholarly articles and academic research papers. A common move in Western academic writing is for authors to begin by presenting their key ideas, findings, or arguments and by mapping out the overall structure of the piece. Abstracts serve the important purpose of setting readers' expectations for what will come next.

Make sure to review examples of abstracts in your discipline—and, if applicable, in the journal to which you intend to submit your paper. Also review guidelines in relevant style manuals. For a sample abstract annotated by UWC writing consultants and more resources on empirical research papers, visit [this link](#).

Typical structure of an abstract:

Abstracts should mirror the structure of the material they summarize. Abstracts for empirical research papers typically employ the following structure:

- *Establish the significance of the topic* (1-2 sentences). Why does the general topic of the research matter? What is its scholarly or practical significance? Is there a gap in knowledge that needs to be filled?
- *State the study's purpose, research question, and/or hypothesis* (1-2 sentences).
- *Describe the study's methods* (2-3 sentences). This includes participants, locations or facilities, procedures, instruments, and/or approaches to data analysis.
- *Describe the study's key findings* (2-3 sentences).
- *Describe the study's implications or applications* (1 sentence). What do the findings mean? How should they be used? How should they be qualified or further investigated?

Writers can easily tailor or adjust this structure for related types of writing. Abstracts for research proposals, for example, won't include findings or implications (as the research hasn't yet been conducted). Abstracts for conference proposals may describe the format for the session. Make sure to carefully review the abstract guidelines in your discipline's style manual, as well as for the conference or journal to which you will submit.

Pitfalls to avoid:

While abstracts accompany and sometimes preface empirical research papers (as well as other types of academic writing), abstracts should be able to stand on their own, and papers should make sense without their abstracts. An abstract is not an introduction, although its first sentence may contain key words, phrases, or ideas from the paper or article's introduction. In fact, it's common for abstracts to use language from throughout the paper; this is not considered redundant, as abstracts and the papers they correspond with are separate compositions. Because abstracts stand on their own, they should not contain quoted material, outside references, or in-text citations.