

Writing An Abstract

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Abstract: *An abstract is a brief description of a completed or proposed research investigation; in research articles, it usually is at the beginning of an article.*

An abstract answers the following questions (usually in about 100 to 300 words):

- A quick summarization of the topic of the study (the first sentence needs to capture the interest of the reader)
- What was the purpose of the study (can include research questions)
- What methods did the researcher use to answer those questions? (the methods used, the sample used)
- What did the researcher discover? (the findings and its contributions to nursing practice)

Debaeky (2005) describes the abstract as the deciding factor determining the worthiness of an article/study. A well-written abstract will encourage the reader(s) to seek more information by obtaining the full text of an article for further reading. As nursing moves towards evidence-based practice the researcher needs to assure that the abstract contains key words. Key words are used in literature searches and need to be included so the study is evaluated in evidence reviews.

An abstract can be used to determine whether a manuscript is worth publishing or presenting at a clinical or research conference. The components of the abstract summarize the content and should have a background sentence, a clearly-stated hypothesis, results and methods, the conclusion, and a final sentence stating the results of the work.

The title of the abstract should capture the interest of the reader that this research is interesting and innovative. The title should include the variables of interest and the target population. Only those who actively participated in the research should be listed under the title. Acknowledgement of contributions to the research can be addressed in the manuscript.

The background information or introduction should state the gap in knowledge being addressed by the study. It is imperative that the first sentence in the introduction be dramatic and 'pull' the reader into the abstract's topic. The final sentence in the introduction should be the purpose of the research.

The methods section may be the most time-intensive part of the abstract. This section needs to include the method (setting, participants in the study, selection process, procedure, intervention if used, outcome variables and their measurement). The main skill in this section is to summarize the findings clearly and succinctly, while concurrently assuring that the validity of the study is highlighted.

The results section should include the results from the main outcome variables, comparisons of groups and significant findings. Descriptive statistics should be presented first, and then the inferential statistics should follow those. With qualitative research the author needs to include the type of data analysis used. It is important that the author review the requirements of the organization with statistical reporting in abstracts.

In the conclusion section the author should state the conclusions and implications based on the evidence of data collection and analysis. Conclusions validate the importance of the work.

It is important to avoid unnecessary abbreviations, spelling or typographical errors, or deviations from preferred formats. Assume that the reviewer has little knowledge of the abstract topic. Define any abbreviations the first time used. Write the abstract in one tense. Most abstracts are written in the past tense as they describe work done/researched in the past.

Abstracts are often drafted before the manuscript is completed, but writing an abstract after the study is completed assures that all important points are covered.

Readers can generally review an abstract to decide whether or not the entire report should be read, and because if this, most researchers try to convey in the abstract only the **key** elements essential for readers to grasp what the study was all about.

Streubert and Carpenter (1995) indicate that the submission of any abstract is to convince a reader that the work or study was done well, that it will be interesting and pertinent, as well as worthy of contributing to the profession. Its purpose is to entice the reader to want to read more.

Abstract journals are useful in that they summarize articles that have appeared in other journals. They are particularly useful in helping a researcher determine whether a particular reference is worth pursuing – as a title alone may not fully indicate an article's contents.

Abstract requirements for different journals and scientific meetings are varied. The researcher needs to be aware of this variance and examine these guidelines before submitting. Follow the guidelines strictly since many organizations will not review abstracts not meeting the requirements.

Writing an abstract is a skill and requires time to develop. One challenge is translating complex thoughts and concepts into simple terms. Novice researchers should consult with an experienced researcher to develop a strong, convincing abstract. Having other peers review the abstract is also beneficial in checking for clarity and grammatical errors. This collaboration may mean the difference between having your abstract accepted at various research presentations.

References:

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