

Campus Academic Resource Program

How to Write an Abstract in Humanities and Social Sciences

This handout will:

- Define an abstract and its difference from a proposal
- Differentiate between an abstract for Humanities and for Social Science
- Describe when to write an abstract
- Provide descriptions of different kinds of abstracts
- Recognize qualities of an effective abstract
- Supply examples and analyses of effective abstracts for Humanities and Social Science
- Allow space to practice recognizing effective qualities of abstracts

What is an Abstract?

An abstract is a short, concise, and authoritative statement about your completed work. It is an active statement, not a summary or review. Although it contains key words and phrases, an abstract should not contain direct excerpts from your completed work. Some components will vary based on the discipline in which you are writing.

- ❖ A Humanities abstract contains: your thesis, questions you are answering in doing your individual research, and the significance of your research in the context of the larger field in your discipline.
- ❖ A Social Science abstract contains: the scope of your research, the purpose of your research, your methodology of research, and the results of your research.

Sometimes, abstracts are confused with proposals. Although they are both important documents about your work, they operate differently both within the scope of your intended audience and in relation to your work. For clarification purposes, we should also have a definition of a proposal to help perceive the difference.

What is a Proposal?

A proposal (or a prospectus) is the first step in producing your work (before it is completed). It is used to ask or persuade an academic committee to begin your thesis/dissertation. A proposal or prospectus is used to receive approval from this committee because you have successfully convinced them that your approach is justifiable and comprehensible in the context of your past work.

- ❖ Keeping this in mind, we can discern that an abstract differs from a proposal/prospectus in a few ways:
 - An abstract is written *after* your work is completed since it includes components of your finished work. On the other hand, a proposal/prospectus is written *before* you begin your work. Whereas your abstract *defines* your work, a proposal/prospectus asks a committee to *start* your work.

Now that we have a basic idea of an abstract, we can determine when to use one as well as the different kinds of abstracts.

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When to Write an Abstract

Although your professor may ask you to abstract your own work for a completed assignment, there are several other instances in which you will have to write an abstract. The University of North Carolina includes instances when:

- You want to have your work considered for publication in a(n) (online) journal
- You want to apply for a grant
- You're writing a book proposal, or a proposal for a chapter of a book
- You need to abstract your own work for a Ph.D. dissertation or M.A. thesis
- You want your completed work to be considered to present at a conference
 - ❖ Although this list is helpful, it does not cover every instance in which you will write an abstract. Keeping this in mind, we can now turn to different *types* of abstracts to determine which one is right for your completed work.

Types of Abstracts: Informative, Descriptive, and Conference

Typically, your professor will give you more concrete guidelines as to how to write your abstract for a specific class. However, it is beneficial to keep these distinctions in mind as you venture on to your own professional career in case you have to make these decisions on your own.

- ❖ **Informative:** An Informative Abstract contains: background information about your research, your main arguments (including the purpose of your research), your methodology, and the results of your completed work. It contains some of the same components as the Descriptive Abstract (see below) but also includes your recommendation for future research. An Informative Abstract can be considered a proxy, or a stand-in, for your completed work. It is usually around 200 words in length. Informative abstracts are usually used for longer works, traditionally Science, Engineering, and Psychology.
- ❖ **Descriptive:** A Descriptive Abstract describes the information your reader will find in your work. It does not, however, provide your results (like an Informative Abstract does). Likely to be very short (100-120 words), this kind of abstract still contains key words you've used and includes the skeletal components: the background of your research, your purpose, your own individual interest in the research, and sometimes an overview of your paper's components. Unlike an Informative abstract, it can be considered as an outline rather than a summary. Even though this type of abstract is most likely used for Humanities and Social Sciences, your professor may want you to include your results as well.
- ❖ **Conference:** A Conference Abstract is submitted when you want your work to be considered to present at a conference. Because the conference committee will not read your actual paper, these abstracts tend to be a bit longer than the previous two mentioned. This kind of abstract operates autonomously from your original work.

Considering these options, it becomes easier to discern which type of abstract you should use for your completed work. You will most likely use the descriptive model in the Humanities and Social Sciences. You can use the conference model for future reference if and when you decide to submit.

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Now that we have covered different types of abstracts, we can discuss qualities of an effective abstract.

Qualities of an Effective Abstract

Although defining “effective” can be tricky, you can compare your completed abstract with the following questions:

- If your abstract contains multiple paragraphs, does each operate efficiently so that it would make sense if one stood alone?
- Does your overall abstract follow the flow of: introduction-body-conclusion?
- Does your completed abstract follow the order in which your arguments and main points are presented in the original paper?
- Does your completed abstract only contain the information in your original work? Your completed abstract should not contain any new information (this kind of speculation would best be used for a proposal).
- Does your abstract answer particular questions regarding your research? Such as:
 1. Why did you conduct this specific research?
 2. What were your findings?
 3. What do these findings mean (either in the context of your class or in the larger field of study)?
 4. What are the benefits of your completed research?
- ❖ Like the previous checklist (When to Write an Abstract), these qualities are not definitive. Instead, you should use your judgment and communication with your professors to determine what should be included in your final draft. For example, some professors will require your abstract to be one paragraph long (which does not mean that your single paragraph shouldn't include the introduction-body-conclusion structure).

Steps for Writing an Effective Abstract

There are many different ways to begin writing, and these are unique to your individual writing style. However, if you are feeling unsure about how to start, here are some helpful tips:

- With the intention of abstracting, read over your completed work again. Be sure to look for main components you will want to include in your abstract such as: your purpose, methods and scope of research, and your results/conclusions.
- Write a first draft of your abstract without referencing your original work. You do not want to summarize your original work. Instead, you want to both contain and describe the main points you considered beforehand.
- Other methods for starting your abstract are: Reverse Outlines, Concept Maps, or Color Coding your arguments
 - Reverse Outlines: Reverse Outlines are done by writing, in one or two sentences, the main idea of each of your paragraphs on a separate piece of paper. This will provide you with an outline of your basic argument and can aid in completing your abstract.

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- Concept Maps: Concept Maps are another way to identify your main argument from your completed work. You can begin a concept map by placing your main idea circled in the center of a separate piece of paper. From there, you can map out your supporting ideas and evidence by creating new circles/boxes with lines attached to your main idea. This is a useful tool for visual learners who can easily locate how each piece of evidence supports the main idea.
- Color Coding: Color Coding is mostly used as a brainstorming technique to begin a paper. However, like the aforementioned methods for abstracting your own work, you can use Color Coding to organize the flow of your completed work. As such, you group your ideas together based on assigned colors. This can help you visualize the structure of your essay (are all the colors contained together?) and how you can organize your abstract.
- Revise your rough draft (multiple times, if necessary)
- Proofread your final copy to ensure your completed abstract:
 - Includes all crucial information from your original work
 - Is as concise as possible (make sure it is not too verbose for the sake of filling space)
 - Is both grammatically and mechanically correct and intelligible
 - Contains strong organization and comprehension
 - Does not contain information not present in your original work
- ❖ In addition to these steps, it is always helpful to have another set of eyes look over your work, preferably someone who is familiar with your research and discipline. Be sure to give yourself enough time to complete an effective abstract.
- ❖ One of the most important parts of completing your abstract is to constantly revise your work. In doing so, you make sure that your abstract does not contain extra words which detract from your overall purpose.
- ❖ Remember, your abstract should be as clear and concise as possible in the smallest amount of space.

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Example and Analysis of a Humanities Abstract (Taken from University of North Carolina)

Kenneth Tait Andrews, “Freedom is a constant struggle!: The dynamics and consequences of the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement, 1960-1984” Ph.D. State University of New York at Stony Brook, 1997 DAI-A 59/02, p. 620, Aug 1998

This dissertation examines the impacts of social movements through a multi-layered study of the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement from its peak in the early 1960s through the early 1980s. By examining this historically important case, I clarify the process by which movements transform social structures and the constraints movements face when they try to do so. The time period studied includes the expansion of voting rights and gains in black political power, the desegregation of public schools and the emergence of white-flight academies, and the rise and fall of federal anti-poverty programs. I use two major research strategies: (1) a quantitative analysis of county-level data and (2) three case studies. Data have been collected from archives, interviews, newspapers, and published reports. This dissertation challenges the argument that movements are inconsequential. Some view federal agencies, courts, political parties, or economic elites as the agents driving institutional change, but typically these groups acted in response to the leverage brought to bear by the civil rights movement. The Mississippi movement attempted to forge independent structures for sustaining challenges to local inequities and injustices. By propelling change in an array of local institutions, movement infrastructures had an enduring legacy in Mississippi.

How This Abstract is Effective:

- Since this abstract discusses the results of the research and thorough inclusion of the same components found in the dissertation itself, it is an Informative abstract.
- Considering our checklist for an effective abstract, we can consider a few ways this example follows those guidelines:
 - It follows the flow of “introduction-body-conclusion.”
 - Although we do not have the completed dissertation in front of us, the abstract’s structure shows that it follows the order in which arguments and main points are presented.
 - There does not seem to be any new information; the author is very thorough in describing his research methods and the results of his research.
 - This abstract also answers the aforementioned questions regarding research:
 1. Why did you conduct this specific research? *“By examining this historically important case, I clarify the process by which movements transform social structures and the constraints movements face when they try to do so.”*
 2. What were your findings? *“This dissertation challenges the argument that movements are inconsequential. Some view federal agencies, courts, political parties, or economic elites as the agents driving institutional change, but typically these groups acted in response to the leverage brought to bear by the civil rights movement.”*
 3. What do these findings mean (in this case, in the larger field of study)? / 4. What are the benefits of your completed research? *“The Mississippi movement attempted to forge independent structures for sustaining challenges to local inequities and injustices. By propelling*

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change in an array of local institutions, movement infrastructures had an enduring legacy in Mississippi.”

Example and Analysis of a Social Science Abstract (Taken from University of Montana)

Traditional Healers and the HIV Crisis in Africa: Toward an Integrated Approach: Anthropology

The HIV virus is currently destroying all facets of African life. It therefore is imperative that a new holistic form of health education and accessible treatment be implemented in African public health policy which improves dissemination of prevention and treatment programs, while maintaining the cultural infrastructure. Drawing on government and NGO reports, as well as other documentary sources, this paper examines the nature of current efforts and the state of health care practices in Africa. I review access to modern health care and factors which inhibit local utilization of these resources, as well as traditional African beliefs about medicine, disease, and healthcare. This review indicates that a collaboration of western and traditional medical care and philosophy can help slow the spread of HIV in Africa. This paper encourages the acceptance and financial support of traditional health practitioners in this effort owing to their accessibility and affordability and their cultural compatibility with the community.

How This Abstract is Effective:

- In addition to the main arguments, results, and evidence, this abstract also contains recommendations for future research; it is an Informative abstract.
- Considering our checklist for an effective abstract, we can consider a few ways this example follows those guidelines:
 - It follows the flow of “introduction-body-conclusion.”
 - Like the previous example, this abstract also seems to follow the order in which arguments and main points are presented.
 - This author is also very specific in the analysis of the completed work. There doesn’t appear to be any new information presented.
 - This abstract also answers the aforementioned questions regarding research:
 1. Why did you conduct this specific research? *“The HIV virus is currently destroying all facets of African life. It therefore is imperative that a new holistic form of health education and accessible treatment be implemented in African public health policy which improves dissemination of prevention and treatment programs, while maintaining the cultural infrastructure.”*
 2. What were your findings? *“Drawing on government and NGO reports, as well as other documentary sources, this paper examines the nature of current efforts and the state of health care practices in Africa. I review access to modern health care and factors which inhibit local utilization of these resources, as well as traditional African beliefs about medicine, disease, and healthcare. This review indicates that a collaboration of western and traditional medical care and philosophy can help slow the spread of HIV in Africa.”*
 3. What do these findings mean (in the larger field of study)? / 4. What are the benefits of your completed research? *“This paper encourages the acceptance and financial support of traditional health practitioners in this effort owing to their accessibility and affordability and their cultural compatibility with the community.”*

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Exercise: Analyze the effectiveness of the following abstracts.

Read the following abstracts. Determine whether they are Humanities or Social Science abstracts, and whether they are Informative or Descriptive abstracts. Then, find the sentences that answer the questions.

Example 1 (Taken from University of Montana)

Friedrich Nietzsche notably referred to the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky as “the only psychologist from whom I have anything to learn.” Dostoevsky’s ability to encapsulate the darkest and most twisted depths of the human psyche within his characters has had a profound impact on those writers operating on the periphery of society. Through research on his writing style, biography, and a close reading of his novel Notes from the Underground I am exploring the impact of his most famous outcast, the Underground Man, on counterculture writers in America during the great subculture upsurge of the 1950s and 60s. Ken Kesey, Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac employ both the universal themes expressed by the Underground Man as well as more specific stylistic and textual similarities. Through my research I have drawn parallels between these three writers with respect to their literary works as well as the impact of both their personal lives and the worlds that they inhabit. The paper affirms that Dostoevsky has had a profound influence on the geography of the Underground and that this literary topos has had an impact on the writers who continue to inhabit that space.

Based on the content, is this a Humanities or Social Science abstract? Why?

Based on the information provided, is this an Informative or Descriptive abstract? Why?

Does this abstract follow the flow of “introduction-body-conclusion”?

Does this abstract answer the aforementioned particular questions regarding research?

1. Why did you conduct this specific research? _____

2. What were your findings? _____

3. What do these findings mean (in the larger field of study)? _____

4. What are the benefits of your completed research? _____

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Example 2 (Taken from University of Wisconsin, Madison)

The purpose of this research is to identify a subtype of autism called Developmental Verbal Dyspraxia (DVD). DVD is a motor-speech problem, disabling oral-motor movements needed for speaking. The first phase of the project involves a screening interview where we identify DVD and Non-DVD kids. We also use home videos to validate answers on the screening interview. The final phase involves home visits where we use several assessments to confirm the child's diagnosis and examine the connection between manual and oral motor challenges. By identifying DVD as a subtype of Autism, we will eliminate the assumption that all Autistics have the same characteristics. This will allow for more individual consideration of Autistic people and may direct future research on the genetic factors in autism.

Based on the content, is this a Humanities or Social Science abstract? Why?

Based on the information provided, is this an Informative or Descriptive abstract? Why?

Does this abstract follow the flow of "introduction-body-conclusion"?

Does this abstract answer the aforementioned particular questions regarding research?

1. Why did you conduct this specific research? _____

2. What were your findings? _____

3. What do these findings mean (in the larger field of study)? _____

4. What are the benefits of your completed research? _____

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Answer Key: Example 1

Based on the content, is this a Humanities or Social Science abstract? Why?

This abstract, first and foremost, discusses impacts of literature. It begins with reference to Nietzsche, a known existentialist philosopher. These factors prove that it is a Humanities abstract. Although not out right, this author hints at the thesis, concerning Dostoevsky's influence and prevalence in other writers' works. It also hints at the significance of this research in the larger field of the discipline.

Based on the information provided, is this an Informative or Descriptive abstract? Why?

Since this abstract doesn't include recommendations for future research, it would be a Descriptive abstract. The word count on this abstract falls below 200 words, and, therefore, further does not categorize it as an Informative abstract. This abstract does provide the results of the research, the scope of the research, the methods of research, as well as the author's personal interest in the research.

Does this abstract follow the flow of "introduction-body-conclusion"?

Yes, it does. The author introduces Dostoevsky through the lens of Nietzsche. He/She then continues to present the specificities of Dostoevsky's work and its influence on specific authors.

Does this abstract answer the aforementioned particular questions regarding research?

1. Why did you conduct this specific research? "Through research on his writing style, biography, and a close reading of his novel Notes from the Underground I am exploring the impact of his most famous outcast, the Underground Man, on counterculture writers in America during the great subculture upsurge of the 1950s and 60s."

2. What were your findings? "Ken Kesey, Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac employ both the universal themes expressed by the Underground Man as well as more specific stylistic and textual similarities. Through my research I have drawn parallels between these three writers with respect to their literary works as well as the impact of both their personal lives and the worlds that they inhabit."

3. What do these findings mean (in the larger field of study)? "Dostoevsky's ability to encapsulate the darkest and most twisted depths of the human psyche within his characters has had a profound impact on those writers operating on the periphery of society."

4. What are the benefits of your completed research? "The paper affirms that Dostoevsky has had a profound influence on the geography of the Underground and that this literary topos has had an impact on the writers who continue to inhabit that space."

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Answer Key: Example 2

Based on the content, is this a Humanities or Social Science abstract? Why?

This abstract begins with the discussion of Developmental Verbal Dyspraxia and takes a psychological approach to the analysis. Therefore, this is a Social Science abstract, specifically in the field of psychology.

Based on the information provided, is this an Informative or Descriptive abstract? Why?

Even though this abstract is very short (124 words), it does contain both the results of the research and partial recommendation for future research. Therefore, it is an Informative abstract, since a Descriptive abstract does not include the above components. However, it should be noted that this is not a typical Informative abstract, since it falls below the 200-word length.

Does this abstract follow the flow of “introduction-body-conclusion”?

This abstract introduces the order in which the author executed the actions. However, the author does not do a formal introduction, such as including background information for the readers. If it were to more closely resemble an Informative format, it would have more space to include the reader in the background of this kind of research.

Does this abstract answer the aforementioned particular questions regarding research?

1. Why did you conduct this specific research? “The purpose of this research is to identify a subtype of autism called Developmental Verbal Dyspraxia (DVD). DVD is a motor-speech problem, disabling oral-motor movements needed for speaking.”

2. What were your findings? “By identifying DVD as a subtype of Autism, we will eliminate the assumption that all Autistics have the same characteristics.”

3. What do these findings mean (in the larger field of study)? / 4. What are the benefits of your completed research? “This will allow for more individual consideration of Autistic people and may direct future research on the genetic factors in autism.”

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