

Facilitator Notes

# Writing an Abstract

These notes accompany the PowerPoint presentation of the same title by Barbara Gastel.

This module normally would accompany modules on writing other parts of a journal article. If desired, the section on abstracts and the section on keywords can be given as mini-modules at different times.

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| Module Title | Writing an Abstract |
| Course title (or analogous information) | This module normally would be part of a workshop or course focusing largely on writing and publishing journal articles on research. It could logically come at either of two times: (1) immediately after the module on titles and authors, in keeping with the order or components in a journal article, or (2) after the set of modules on the four main parts of a journal article, because one writes or revises the abstract at this point. If option (1) is chosen, it can be advisable to review the content with the participants after the set of modules on the four main parts of an article.  The module also can function as a freestanding session, especially if is expanded using material from the presentations noted in Slide 6. |
| Unit Title | Not applicable |
| No. of Unit | Not applicable |
| Session Day/Time | Not applicable |
| Length of Session | This module typically would run about 30 to 45 minutes, depending in part on the amount of discussion. An expanded version could run about 1 hour. |
| Aim | This module is intended mainly to increase participants’ ability to write abstracts for their journal articles and, if requested by the journal, to provide keywords. |
| Learning Outcomes | By the end of this module, participants will be able to (1) state reasons that abstracts are important, (2) organize an abstract of a journal article appropriately, (3) state what keywords are, and (4) choose suitable keywords for journal articles. |
| Facilitator Profile | Ideally, this workshop would be facilitated by someone who has experience with research writing (for example, as an author of journal articles or as an editor), because such an individual can enrich the content with examples from his or her experience. However, a less experienced facilitator also can present the module, as the combination of PowerPoint slides and facilitator notes provides sufficient information to do so. Also, the module can be presented jointly by a facilitator and a co-facilitator who provides additional commentary. |
| Participant Profile | This module is primarily for early-career researchers who are starting to publish their work. It also may be useful to mid-career researchers who wish to improve their writing or increase their ability to mentor others in research writing. In addition, it may be helpful to some editors and writing instructors. |
| Pre-workshop Activities | (1) If possible, each participant should bring a set of instructions to authors. Ideally, the instructions should be for a journal in which the participant hopes to publish. If at least some participants will not or might not bring instructions to authors, the facilitator should, if possible, bring some instructions to authors or links thereto.  (2) If possible, each participant should bring a journal article reporting research in his or her field. Ideally, it should report research related to the participant’s research and should be in a journal in which the participant hopes to publish. If at least some participants will not or might not bring articles, the facilitator should, if possible, bring some articles or some links to articles.  (3) If participants are currently writing journal articles, they should bring drafts of their articles. |
| Room Layout | Ideally, this module will be presented in a room layout facilitating interaction—for example, with several small tables, with tables in a U configuration, or with a conference table. However, this module also can be presented in a traditional classroom or a lecture hall. |
| Number of Participants | For optimum discussion, the number of participants should be limited to about 10–15. However, the module also can reasonably delivered to about 25 participants. |
| Files and Materials | PowerPoint file: 09\_Writing an Abstract  Examples of Abstracts and Keywords: If possible, the facilitator should choose sample abstracts and keywords that would be especially relevant to the participants, for example because they are in some participants’ fields. However, other abstracts or sets of keywords can suffice. Some examples that can be used appear in the presentations listed in Slide 6.  (Note: Facilitators wishing more generally to expand the current presentation can add content from the presentations listed in Slide 6.) |
| Visual Aids and Resources | Computer with PowerPoint; projector for PowerPoint presentation; Internet connection if possible |
| Potential Embellishments of the PowerPoint | To keep the file small, the presentation consists almost solely of text. Images can be added to make it more visually appealing. For example, decorative images can be inserted between sections to signal a change of subtopic and provide visual relief. Also, relevant images can be added to selected slides if desired.  If desired, the facilitator can divide the material on a given slide into more than one slide or can format some slides for progressive disclosure, in which items on a slide are revealed one by one.  Also, as noted above, facilitators wanting to expand this module can add content from the presentations listed on Slide 6. Of course, if substantial amounts of material from such sources are used, the sources should be cited. |
| Learning methods and activities | The following notes may help facilitators to (1) elaborate on the content of some slides and (2) elicit group participation at suitable times. In the PowerPoint presentation, similar notes appear in the notes sections below the respective slides.   * (Slide 1 is a title slide.) * Slide 2 (“Overview”)   + Note the topics that the module will address.   + Note the module’s overall aim, which is stated earlier in this facilitator’s guide. (Feel free, of course, to frame the purpose in the way that the group is likely to find most relevant.) * Slide 3 (“The Abstract: First to Be Read but Last to Be Revised”)   + Note that people commonly read the abstract before reading other text in a paper.   + Mention that different authors like to draft the abstract at different times. Some authors like to draft the abstract before the rest of the paper, to help provide focus and direction. Others like to draft the abstract last, once they know what they are summarizing. In any case, the abstract should be revised last, to ensure that it is consistent with the rest of the paper.   + Perhaps ask participants at what point they like to draft abstracts. Facilitators may well also share their experience in this regard. * Slide 4 (“The Abstract”)   + Emphasize that an abstract should summarize the main content of the paper.   + Note that abstracts tend to be very important, for the reasons noted in the second and third bullets.   + Note: Abstracts often appear without the paper (for example, in databases), and so they should be understandable on their own. Thus, for example, they normally should not include items such as references and undefined abbreviations.   + Either ask participants what IMRAD stands for or remind them of the meaning (Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion). Note that abstracts generally should parallel the IMRAD format. In other words, typically they should first briefly provide context and state what the research was intended to find out, then state the overall methods used, then state the main findings, and then briefly note the implications.   + In mentioning structured abstracts, include an example of standardized headings (for instance: Background, Methods, Results, Conclusions). Perhaps ask the participants whether they are in fields in which structured abstracts are sometimes used.   + Note that one strategy for writing a well-organized traditional abstract is to write a structured abstract and then remove the headings.   + Mention that typically abstracts do not include figures or tables. Note, however, that some journals, for example in chemistry, allow or even encourage inclusion of one figure or table. * Slide 5 (“The Abstract (cont)”)   + Note: Papers reporting new research normally should have informative abstracts, which summarize the content. However, some other types of papers, such as review articles, may have indicative abstracts.   + With regard to ensuring that the content of the abstract is consistent with that of the paper: Note that inconsistencies sometimes arise if an author corrects as error in the body of the paper but then forgets to do so in the abstract. * Slide 6 (“Resources”)   + Encourage participants wanting to know more about abstracts to consult these resources.   + If desired, show some items from one or more of these resources.   + As noted, items from these resources can be used to expand the current presentation. * Slide 7 (“Exercise”)   + Have the participants address the questions in small groups. Then bring the full group together to discuss responses and ask questions.   + If early in the discussion participants haven’t said anything in the following regard: Ask whether any of the instructions to authors mentioned maximum lengths for abstracts and, if so, what lengths were stated.   + Regarding length of abstracts: Advise participants not to worry about length when writing first drafts of abstracts; it’s better to draft an abstract that is too long and then condense it than to omit important content because one is worrying about length. Perhaps mention that suggestions for condensing wording appear on the AuthorAID website, for example at <http://www.authoraid.info/en/news/details/762/>.   + If some parts of the exercise are not relevant, of course omit them. For example, if participants are not bringing drafts of papers, delete the third bulleted item. * Slide 8 (“Keywords”)   + Note that keywords are terms that indicate the subject matter of an article and therefore that providing suitable keywords can help people find one’s article when searching on one’s topic.   + Mention that not all journals request keywords.   + Mention that some journals say not to include words that already appear in the title, as doing so is redundant.   + If possible, provide examples of lists of keywords from articles. In doing so, it can work well to show the title, abstract, and keywords together. The examples may appear on one or more slides inserted after this one, or the facilitator may link to examples online. * Slide 9 (“Exercise”)   + Have the participants do this exercise in small groups.   + Then bring the full group together for discussion.   + If part of this exercise are not relevant (for example, because participants have not brought drafts), of course omit it. * Slide 12 (“In Conclusion”)   + If time permits, include a question-and-answer session before ending.   + Perhaps do one or both of the following:     - Have participants note points to remember.     - Summarize the session.   + If the workshop or course will include later modules, note the topic of the next module. Perhaps also note more generally what will follow.   + Perhaps encourage group members to share points from this session with others. |