

Dr. K's Short and Snappy Guide to

HOW TO WRITE AN ABSTRACT

Humanities scholars and students aren't usually taught to write abstracts like our friends in the natural and social sciences are. That's because in the humanities, full pieces of discourse are preferred to short, condensed summaries. But in many cases you will NEED to write an abstract for your work—and a lot of what your colleagues in other disciplines know can help you.

Let's start with the basic questions.

What is a descriptive abstract?

A descriptive abstract is the summary of work you have already completed or work you are proposing. It is **not** the same thing as the introduction to your work. The abstract should give readers a short, concise snapshot of the work **as a whole**—not just how it starts. Remember that the readers of your abstract will sometimes not read the paper as a whole, so in this short document you need to give them an overall picture of your work. If you are writing an abstract as a proposal for your research—in other words, as a request for permission to write a paper—the abstract serves to predict the kind of paper you hope to write.

What's different about a conference paper (or informative) abstract?

A conference abstract is one you submit to have your paper considered for presentation at a professional conference. Its length will be specified by the conference organizer but will rarely be more than 500 words (just short of two double-spaced pages). In an ideal world, it is written **after** the actual paper is completed, but in some cases you'll write an abstract for a paper you haven't yet written—especially if the conference is some time away. Because the conference review committee will usually read the abstract and not your actual paper, you need to think of it as an independent document, aimed at that specific committee and connecting solidly with the theme of the conference (you may want to pick up phrasing from the conference title or call for papers in the abstract to reinforce this connection). Examine the call for papers carefully; it will specify the length of the abstract, special formatting requirements, whether the abstract will be published in the conference bulletin or proceedings, etc. Abstracts that do not meet the specified format are usually rejected early in the proceedings, so pay attention to each conference's rules!

What's different about a thesis proposal or prospectus?

A prospectus, which is a formal plan for your research, usually is the first part of a thesis/dissertation or a major research project that you will write. This persuasive document must convince your director, committee, or graduate advisor that your topic and approach are sound, so that they will give you the green light to begin the actual research (and sometimes so you can gain funding for that research). The prospectus situates your work, showing what theories you will use, how your work connects to previous research on the subject, and where you think the research will take you.

How wedded are you to the abstract you submit?

An abstract is a promissory note. That is, you are promising that you can and will produce the goods in the paper. Particularly in the case of a conference abstract, the organizers will make up a session based on the contents of the abstract. If you propose a paper that says you will use Foucault to comment on post-colonialism in *Heat and Dust* and then show up with a paper on "Metaphors for Spring in *A Bend in the River*," your paper may not fit the session where it was slotted, and you'll look silly—and those organizers may not ask you back. While some divergence from the promised topic is acceptable (and probably inevitable if you haven't written the paper when you submit the abstract), you need to produce a paper that's within shouting distance of your original topic for the sake of keeping your promise.

Examples of all three kinds of abstracts can be found at <http://faculty.winthrop.edu/kosterj/abstractsamples.pdf>.

Now, on to the fundamentals.

Length, Contents, and Organization

Descriptive abstracts are usually only 100-250 words, so they must be pared down to the essentials. Typically, a descriptive abstract answers these questions:

Why did you choose this study or project? What did/will you do and how? What did you/do you hope to find? (For a completed work) What do your findings mean?

The title should be informative and focused, indicating the problem and your general approach. It's very fashionable in the humanities to have titles featuring "post-colonial surge"—a catchy phrase, a colon, and then an explanation of the title. While snappy titles may help your abstract be noticed, it's really what comes after the colon that sells the abstract, so pay attention to it. "All the World's a Ship: Race and Ethnicity in *Moby Dick*" catches the eye, but "Melville's Deconstruction of Ethnicity in the 'Midnight, Forecastle' Episode of *Moby Dick*" tells readers much more specifically what you're promising to deliver.

Don't repeat or rephrase your title in the body of the abstract; usually it's already provided in the heading. Summarize your thesis and conclusions in the abstract, as well as your goals, approach and main findings. Keep bibliographic references to a minimum and embed the information in-text; short abstracts don't have Works Cited pages or footnotes.

The abstract should begin with a clear sense of the research question you have framed (and, if the work is completed, with your thesis). Often this is set up as a problem/solution strategy: "Although some recent scholars claim to have identified Shakespeare's lost play *Cardenio*, that attribution is still not accepted. In this paper I use the records of the Worshipful Company of Stationers, London's chief publishing organization, to show that the play identified by Charles Hamilton in 1990 is not actually the play Shakespeare's company mounted in 1613."

It always helps when you identify the theoretical or methodological school that you are using to approach your question or position yourself within an ongoing debate. This helps readers situate your ideas in the larger conversations of your discipline. For instance, "The debate among Folsom, McGann, and Stallybrass over the notion of database as a genre (*PMLA* 122.5, Fall 2007) suggests that..." or "Using the definition of dataclouds proposed by Johnson-Eilola (2005), I will argue that..."

Finally, briefly state your conclusion. "Through analyzing Dickinson's use of metaphor, I demonstrate that she systematically transformed Watt's hymnal tropes as a way of asserting her own doctrinal truths. This transformation..."

There's an ongoing debate about how much jargon should be included in an abstract. My best advice is to add any technical terms you need, but don't put in jargon for jargon's sake or just to make it look like you are an expert (this especially extends to (post)modernizing your words or other typographical excrescences).

Conference Abstracts

To the basic requirements of the descriptive abstract, a conference paper abstract should also include a few sentences about how the proposed paper fits in the theme of the conference. For instance, a call for papers for a session on "Science and Literature in the 19th Century" at a conference entitled "(Dis)Junctions" requested "critical works on the interaction between scientific writing and literature in the 19th century. How did scientific discoveries, theories and assumptions (for example, in medicine and psychology, but not limited to these) influence contemporaneous fiction?" If you were submitting a paper to this session, you would want to have a sentence or two

about the theories you were discussing and name the particular works where you would identify their influence. If you can work the words “join” or “junction” (or “disjunction”) into your title or abstract, you’ll increase your chance of having the paper accepted, since you’re showing clearly how the paper fits the theme of the session.

It’s also considered good in a conference abstract to conclude with a sentence about your presentation, since the great horror of session chairs is the paper that runs far too long (or embarrassingly too short). Organizers also need to know if you need any special technology to present the paper. So a concluding sentence such as “This paper can be presented in 20 minutes and requires the technology to show brief film clips on DVD” is a much-appreciated professional touch.

The Thesis Prospectus

Note: much of the remaining material was inspired by a handout at <http://writingcenter.unlv.edu/writing/abstract.html>.

A prospectus for an honors or masters’ thesis is not a contract but a plan of research: its purpose is to orient your writing, not to circumscribe it. Your prospectus is not a binding agreement, but simply something that looks ahead--hence the term “prospectus,” a prospect, but not necessarily a destination. Since you are writing it before you have undertaken the research, it may not reflect the exact shape of the final thesis; you may need to revise your approach or scope with the advice of your director and committee as your work evolves. A Master’s thesis is usually 50-75 pages (or more); an honors thesis is more often in the 35-50 page range. It provides your first opportunity for extended independent research in the field, and often develops out of a senior seminar paper, a graduate seminar paper, or a major course paper.

You should prepare the prospectus in close cooperation with your faculty advisor, giving the same attention to writing quality that you would a major paper (i.e., revise and edit it!). The prospectus will normally run 4-7 pages of text (for an honors thesis) and up to 15 pages of text (for a masters’ thesis), followed by a bibliography or Works Cited list. (Some advisors prefer an annotated bibliography; check with yours to see which you should prepare.) Normally, a prospectus follows a fairly predictable pattern:

I. Topic. Spell out the idea or question you intend to study and indicate what value you think this inquiry will have (for instance, if you intend to compare and contrast O’Connor and Welty’s short fiction, why is such a comparison needed). In setting up your thesis, you want to show that you have focused the topic to an appropriate scope, neither too large (“Women in American Literature” or too small (“Women in *The Awakening*”).

II. Critical context. Next, provide a review of previous work on your topic, showing not only what major directions that previous work has taken, but how your work will connect to the existing body of criticism, and what will make your work new (and, for a dissertation, original). In the final version, this may be a full chapter; now it should be more of a sketch, showing your readers that you know the territory you will have to cover.

III. Plan of organization. Include a detailed outline or several paragraphs suggesting how you plan to develop your idea (of course, this may change as you actually write it). Unlike those high school papers where you wrote the outline after the paper was completed, for the prospectus you must predict your organization before you’ve written the text. This act gives your readers a sense of how you think the thesis may play out (for instance, will you have a chapter on O’Connor, a chapter on Welty, and then bring the material together, or will you have several chapters in which you compare and contrast particular stories?) Usually a master’s thesis will have an introduction, three or four chapters, and a conclusion; an honors thesis may follow the same pattern, or may be written as one continuous argument without chapters. Again, talk to your advisor to see what strategies s/he or your department recommend.

IV. Individual preparation. It's traditional to include a paragraph or two explaining why you are interested in and ready to write about your topic, the courses you have taken in relevant areas, and any outside reading that has contributed to your ability to write this particular thesis. If foreign language, research design, or other technical skills are required, explain your qualifications (or how you will acquire them in the course of researching the thesis).

V. Sources. Explain to your readers how you will acquire your information—for instance, if you are conducting surveys, that process should be described here. If you will have to use Interlibrary Loan or PASCAL to access materials, or obtain permission for research with human subjects, note that as well. While literature majors usually can get access to texts pretty easily, sometimes it's easy to overlook important steps; this section helps you make sure you don't fall into that trap.

VI. Timetable. Include a projected schedule of your time frame for completing the thesis. Remember to build in enough time for your readers to respond to drafts and return them to you; at the very minimum, give your readers a week to read each individual chapter (and more time at the end of the semester, when they are swamped with other work). It's best to ask your readers in advance how much time they typically need to read materials so that you can make realistic plans. Procrastination is a time-honored student habit, but it does not work in thesis preparation. Remember too that the Graduate School sets specific deadlines for submission that must be observed. It is your responsibility to meet the assigned dates.

VII. Reading List or Bibliography. Finally, list the primary sources for your research, along with an overview of the most important secondary materials you will use. It need not be annotated unless your advisor or committee desires that. Part of the purpose of this bibliography is to demonstrate your competence in documentation and in using the appropriate research databases, so make sure that you treat this section with care.

Dr. DeRochi can provide you with examples of successful prospectuses from former students if you want to look at models.

Acknowledgements:

I consulted and borrowed material from the following websites in preparing these suggestions:

www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/abstracts.html

www.linguistics.ucsb.edu/faculty/bucholtz/sociocultural/abstracttips.html

www.academic-conferences.org/abstract-guidelines.htm

http://ceca.icom.museum/_dbase_upl/writinganabstract.pdf

<http://ling.wisc.edu/~macaulay/800.abstracts.html>

<http://writingcenter.unlv.edu/writing/abstract.html>

<http://www.lightbluetouchpaper.org/2007/03/14/how-not-to-write-an-abstract/>

<http://webapp.comcol.umass.edu/msc/absGuidelines.aspx>

<http://www.oberlin.edu/history/Honors/prospectus.html>

<http://www.english.eku.edu/ma/scholarlythesis.php>

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