

**A BRIEFING
ON WRITING
A SUCCESSFUL
ABSTRACT**

**ENHANCING
DIVERSITY IN
THE NURSING
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RUNNING HEAD:

A Briefing on Writing a Successful Abstract

The abstract is surprisingly a neglected activity in the practitioner and scholarly manuscript preparation process. Researchers, practitioners, and students work passionately on their projects and initiatives. They realize that what they have accomplished has value and would like to share it with a wide audience in the health professions field. Thus, they begin the manuscript preparation process and work diligently to get the narrative, data, tables/graphs, and references ready for the editor of a journal and the peer review process. They carefully review the “instructions for authors.” However, the abstract often ends up as that “one last thing to do” before sending off the manuscript. It does not always get the attention it deserves.

This is unfortunate as the abstract, according to the American Psychological Association’s publication manual, “...can be the most important single paragraph in an article” (APA, 2009). Most professionals and students understand that the abstract is a concise summary of the article’s subject matter, purpose, results, and implications communicated to the reader. But it can be much more than that, as the well-written abstract can go beyond the perfunctory guidelines of the journal to provide character to the work and stimulate the curiosity and interest of the readers who the authors hope will go on to read the full article. This briefing provides general comments, details, examples, nuances, and some tips on preparing an abstract for an article, as well as gives some helpful advice to preparing an abstract for an in-person presentation at a professional association or scholarly conference or poster session.

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

Uses for an Abstract: This briefing is written with the mindset of an abstract for

an article in a nursing practice or scholarly journal. However, in your nursing career as a student, faculty, or practitioner you will see the abstract used for a number of purposes-- all of which are important. For example, an abstract is used for a *thesis* and *dissertation*. Most in the nursing profession have their first major experience with an abstract written for a *poster*, *paper*, *roundtable*, or *workshop session* submitted to a professional association, government, or subject matter sponsor of a meeting, conference, or symposium. It is important to be able to craft a high-quality abstract, as this determines whether or not authors will be chosen by peer reviewers for a scholarly session or poster presentation. Some journals publish stand alone abstracts of works in the field (*published abstracts*), after which those interested in the subject can contact the authors for more expanded treatment of the research or program. Similarly, some abstracts are published in a *proceedings publication* after a meeting of experts or stakeholders gather to discuss a topic; the proceedings documents what took place during the meeting.

Title: Even though the title of an article or presentation is a separate piece, when preparing the abstract it is a good time to revisit the title. Make sure it has key words that will be captured by a search in the subject matter and field of study. Creative and cute titles selected for marketing value, may not get captured in a search. At a minimum, make sure the title includes a What (topical area) and Who (study group or those affected). Example of a good descriptive title:

“The identification of clinical and professional leadership activities of advanced practitioners: findings from the Specialist Clinical and Advanced Practitioner Evaluation study in Ireland” (Naomi, Higgins, Begley, Lalor, Sheerin, Coyne, & Murphy, 2013).

- Why? — understand clinical leadership activities
- Who? — nurse practitioners in Ireland
- What? — study of leadership activities among advanced nurse practitioners via evaluation study

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- Where? — Ireland
- When? — not known from title
- How? — report of findings from a specialist clinical and advanced practitioner evaluation study

Make Every Word Count: The publication will set the limit for the number of words that can be used in the abstract, and with today's online submissions-- not one word more will likely be accepted. Word limits for abstracts generally range from 150 to 250 words. The trend in publications has been to use fewer words; thus it is important to make every word count. Start by writing as much as one can to answer the questions below in this next section and then edit...and then edit some more. Give primacy to key nouns, meaningful descriptors, and powerful action words.

Five "W"s and one "H": Make sure the abstract answers the well-recognized questions for any type of good communication and think about these questions in this order Why? (Ikes & Gambescia, 2011). Give the problem statement or rationale for why this subject matter or overall research question is important to address.

- *Who* is affected or involved in the study or program?
- *Where?* Give the reader a sense of where the study or program takes place; don't assume that the reader knows the place from which the work is generated.
- *When?* Give the reader time references (retrospective or prospective; longitudinal study).
- *How?* Give enough detail to have the reader understand the method used to achieve results.
- (so) *What?* Give the practical implications for the work.

Types of Abstracts: There are several types of abstracts used in the

nursing field for which the constructs used will change. Most abstracts are written for one of these types of articles/presentations/posters:

- **Empirical (research) study:** uses quantitative or formal qualitative information that generates new knowledge in the field.
- **Program/Project:** describes in detail an education program, service, or systems change and gives readers ideas for how to replicate the work; sometimes called a demonstration project.
- **Literature Review:** survey of published work done on this topic identifying gaps and opportunities for further investigation.
- **Methods:** describes a research, programmatic, or teaching method.
- **Best Practice:** describes a “tried and true” way of doing something in the health field (planning, implementation, management, oversight, or evaluation).
- **Case study:** gives a detailed account of a program, process, or an event from which lessons can be learned; successes and pitfalls can be drawn.

Editor's Guidelines: Although there are some general standards used in the nursing field, carefully read and follow the *instructions to authors* from the editors or conference sponsors. These instructions will give you precise information from constructs to include, to length of abstract, to any formatting styles. Conferences often look for themes and sub-themes so make sure your abstract uses language that speaks to these themes. Avoid hinting that the sponsors have the “wrong” theme, and that they should accept the authors work.

THE CONSTRUCTS OF AN ABSTRACT

As mentioned earlier, it is important to follow the editor of a journal's instructions or call for abstracts from the spon-

sors to know what constructs or headings to include in the abstract. The challenge here is that they may give only one or two examples (usually research or project focus) but the type of article or presentation the authors wish to submit may lend itself to different labels. Editors and reviewers will give some latitude to the authors on the actual labels. However, stay true to the formatting requirements. This is not the time to get creative with formatting. An abstract needs to be a no-nonsense, efficient, and easy-to-read paragraph. Below are helpful details on what each construct should include or what questions need to be answered as discussed above.

Background/Rationale/Problem Statement: These are three common labels used for the first construct in the abstract. Most abstracts ask authors to *define a nursing challenge or problem* or concern and to give some background on the issue. What are the reasons for studying this issue? Why is this problem or issue important? Even common health professions problems or issues need to be defined further to give readers information about why this deserves their attention--its relevance in the field---and something new is going to be shared.

Participants or Units of Study: Health studies usually involve people and groups of people. There are various levels of engagement from the individual to groups to institutions to a community to societies, and even worldwide. Use terms that help the reader understand the characteristics of the people or organizations involved in the study or program, e.g. sex, age, race, ethnic group, occupation, geographic location etc.

Method: Define for the reader the research method used or the methods to achieve results in the health enhancing initiative or program. A methods section is quite detailed in a journal article, so

it will be a challenge to write just a few sentences describing the methods used in the project. Try to use easily recognized terms for your area of study and don't get weighed down with too many details about the methods; overwriting is tempting in this part.

Findings/Results: This is often the most important section of the abstract because it is the *raison d'être* of academic research and scholarly publications. Readers want to cut through the chaff to see what you found...What is new (and hopefully exciting) about your findings? However, there are several approaches to writing this section. Those interested in traditional basic science reports or quantitative studies abstracts tend to want to have the data rich findings; give the reader just the numbers. Other works may give qualitative statements about the findings and expect that the reader will refer to the full article to “get the numbers.”

Interpretation/Discussion: This should be the most interesting and exciting part of the abstract and full article as it allows the authors to express their opinion for what the findings mean in the area under study. Authors can write with more subjectivity, passion, and enthusiasm for their work. Here is where the research can come alive! This is where the article moves beyond the descriptive to meaningful synthesis and analysis of the issue under study. However impressions given should be based on the findings of the research unless the article is by design a commentary.

Implications for Practice or FRN: Authors in nursing journals are usually asked to address the implications for practice given the results of their research. One can think of this as the section to answer the “So what?” question that the critical reader will be asking.

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This is especially true in health studies. How does the research or program help the nurse professional, educator, or manager in practice? How does the research or results of a demonstration project help or hinder the day-to-day work of nursing? In basic science terms, this section usually addresses what further research is needed or "FRN."

Key Words: Again, as with the abstract itself, key words will not demand a lot of writing so they need to be right on target. Key words are used to help the editor assign papers or posters to peer reviewers; used to help file, store, and retrieve information after indexing. Make sure your key words reflect how people will search for articles which may be a bit different than words used in the publication. The key words may actually not be used in the abstract itself but communicate the concept of the article. For example, one key set of words used in this article is "writing for publication" which communicates an action that your readers will take and this article can help them with that action.

SUMMARY VERSUS PREVIEW

There is conventional agreement that the abstract is a concise statement or summary of the work under investigation or the program outcome. However, one alternative strategy in writing an abstract that is author friendly is to give the reader just enough information to entice him/her to want to reach for the full article and read on. The abstract serves to give the readers enough information to catch their attention but not too much which may negate the need to read the article or even attend a session. Similar to the movie preview, the abstract gives enough information to demonstrate value, newness, and excitement, but not enough to give the whole story (Jordan & Zanna, 2000).

A FINAL WORD

Some researchers become quite facile at the "search, scan, read/don't read" protocol in reviewing abstracts. Editors and peer reviewers will make some preliminary assessments on their first impression of your work from the abstract alone. A poorly written abstract for a conference presentation or poster makes it easy for peer reviewers to reject your ideas; furthermore, an abstract that is too vague or diffuse may assign presenters to a session that may not be the best fit for your work to be heard. The abstract needs to be good enough to carry through the pathways of the full review process, from the first glance, to several peer reviewers, back to the editor and then to the final copy editors. Obviously the abstract alone cannot stand-in for the actual work by authors but a poorly prepared abstract gives reviewers the opportunity to make the work a non-starter. The abstract needs to be the most powerful 150 or so words in your writing. You have worked hard on a manuscript, project, or proposal, so invest the quality time in writing a powerful abstract that will catch the reader's attention. •

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