

Suggestions for your abstract

Both, your term paper and your poster will need an abstract. The suggestions below will help you to write a successful abstract even though you will have to modify them somewhat, reflecting the fact that you don't have any original data etc. Nevertheless, you want to convey information and your conclusions, which should take the place of data etc..

The length of your abstract should range between 200 - 300 words.

The following Chapter is taken from:

Scientist's Guide to Poster Presentations, by Dr. P.J. Gosling, Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, New York, pp. 139, 1999

A copy of the book can be found in the library. Even though this chapter deals with abstracts for poster presentations it is equally valid for paper abstracts.

4. WRITING THE POSTER ABSTRACT

The poster abstract is the part of the overall presentation that is usually destined for publication in the proceedings or abstract book of the meeting. Specific skills are required to summarize large amounts of scientific text and data into a few sentences that still adequately set the scene and convey the appropriate message. The abstract is not merely a summary of your findings. It must be able to, and indeed will, stand alone. The restriction on the number of words, the format, and the deadline for receipt will be given by the conference organizers. It is common to supply a box out line in which the abstract must be typed or printed in a camera ready format. This is the lasting part of your presentation, and you need to devote a suitable amount of time to ensuring that it maintains the same high quality as the rest of your presentation. For this reason a good quality copy should be sent for publication, avoiding faxing, as the results are often difficult to read. For casual readers this may be the only part of your presentation that is seen. You should therefore avoid the use of phrases such as "evidence will be presented," and make the abstract as representative of the whole presentation as possible. The abstract should be tackled with the same approach as the poster. It should by its nature be concise, but nevertheless contain all the main elements. It should be lively and should be presented enthusiastically with a sense of achievement. Producing good abstracts is an acquired skill that requires practise. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for abstracts to be a staccato of short, sharp statements strung together. This can be avoided by careful planning of what actually needs to be contained in the abstract and by critical editing.

4.1. WHAT THE ABSTRACT SHOULD CONTAIN

The abstract must be able to stand alone. It should concisely summarize the basic content of the paper without presenting extensive experimental details. It should contain a brief statement of the need for the study, the aims, the way in which you tackled the problem, and the most important findings. Generally, the abstract should not include details of methods, unless of course the poster is introducing a new scientific method as the focus of the presentation. Abbreviations and references should be avoided, and diagrams, illustrations, and other graphic material should not be included. If it is essential to include a reference, use the same format as given in the references section but omit the article title. Above all, the abstract should contain enough information to clearly convey your scientific take-home message and the evidence you are presenting in support of it. As the abstract will usually be published separately in the proceedings of the meeting, it must be complete and understandable without reference to the poster text.

4.2. A SUGGESTED APPROACH

Having established what a good abstract should contain, the following is one way in which the task may be approached:

1. *Statement introduction.* A clear statement of the need for your research should be drafted. Keep it as short as you can, but at this stage do not worry too much about the number of words.
2. *Aims of the research.* Draft a statement or statements of the aims of your study. Restrict yourself to the aims specifically related to the poster presentation and your take-home message. It is quite likely that the information you are presenting is part of a larger research program with wider overall aims. Take pains to focus only on the issues to be covered in your poster.
3. *Methods.* A statement of the way in which your aims were achieved is required. This should not detail methods but may allude to techniques. It may help to imagine that you are orally explaining to someone how you conducted the experiments. It is probable you will use terms such as "investigated by scanning electron microscopy" or "tested by polymerase chain reaction" rather than describing step-by-step the procedures of what you did.
4. *Significant findings.* Make a list of all the significant findings you have included in your poster presentation. Again at this stage do not be overly concerned with the number of words.
5. *Take-home message.* Draft a clear, concise statement of your take-home message. Again it may help to imagine that you are orally informing a colleague of the overall relevance of your findings. This should be one sentence.

The previously mentioned statements are put together to form the initial draft of your abstract. This will almost certainly be rather jerky in style and contain far too many words. It does, however, represent the first draft, an unedited version on which you may work to produce a more polished form.

4.3. EDITING

This is the stage in which the initial draft of your abstract will be molded to produce a more accomplished piece of text that is of the size stipulated by the conference organizers. This may require ruthless revisions but you should not be deterred from this. The text will benefit enormously from judicious editing.

Condensing a sentence often requires reconstruction and rigorous editing to avoid repetition, redundancies, tautology, and the use of unnecessary words or clauses. Go through your text repeatedly, experimenting with alternate words or phrases that say the same thing but in a more concise manner. However, in your attempt at brevity be careful not to introduce terms of vague emphasis, such as *considerable*, *very*, *relatively*, *somewhat*, or *rather*.

Sentences may often be shortened by the judicious use of adjectives and adverbs; for example, the sentence "Every year different research findings have shown how complicated the issues in the scientific field of microbial taxonomy have become" may be written as "The science of micro-bial taxonomy is becoming increasingly complex."

4.4. HINTS ON STYLE

The following are some hints on style that will assist you in writing your poster abstract:

1. Keep sentences short and succinct.
2. Describe experiments and results in the past tense, but conclusions and generalizations drawn from them in the present.
3. Separate text by new paragraphs when necessary but avoid too many as space is limited.
4. Use short words in preference to long ones.
5. Avoid extraneous text - keep it snappy and to the point!
6. Do not include diagrams.
7. Avoid jargon.
8. Avoid ambiguity.
9. Avoid vague expressions.

4.5. THE FINAL CHECK

When you have what you consider to be the final draft, check the text for spelling errors, incorrect data, and grammatical errors. This seems to be an obvious step, but if omitted it can lead to an embarrassing, enduring result. Read the text aloud and listen to the rhythm created by the punctuation. Adjust it to avoid staccato lists of statements or long, breath-straining segments of text. It is also a prudent step to ask two or three colleagues to proofread the draft before submitting it to the meeting organizers.