

# How to Write an Abstract

If you've tried to submit your research to a conference or a journal, you've likely been asked to submit an "abstract." We don't get much practice writing this sort of thing in our courses, so we thought a short guide would help. What follows is written by Dr. [Emily Gravett](#), Assistant Director of Trinity's [Collaborative for Learning and Teaching](#).

## **What is an abstract?**

An abstract is a brief summary of an article, thesis, dissertation, book, conference presentation, poster, or any other original argument. An abstract is typically required for acceptance into conference proceedings or for publication. It is usually limited to 100-500 words.

## **What is the purpose of an abstract?**

The abstract can:

- Help readers quickly ascertain a work's topic and primary purpose.
- Give readers the most basic and useful information about a work, without requiring them to read it all.
- Help readers find and select work that they might find useful for their own research.
- Allow reviewers evaluate whether a work merits acceptance to a journal or conference.
- Provide a short overview/preview of the work that can be included in programs and other promotional materials for journals and/or conferences.

## **Where might you include or submit an abstract of your work?**

- A journal
- A conference
- A book or collected volume
- A class
- A grant, scholarship, or other funding application
- An academic curriculum vitae (CV) or, less likely, a resume

**There are two main types of abstracts:**

1. The first type is when a scholar writes about work she has already completed (e.g., a paper she has already written). This is a backward-looking or retrospective type of abstract, in that all of the information to include in the abstract is already available.
2. The second type is when a scholar writes an abstract about work not yet completed. This often happens when a scholar proposes to present at a conference that is far off in the future. This type of abstract is forward-looking or prospective, as the scholar is only forecasting what he plans to do; he has not yet completed all of the work. Usually the final product differs somewhat from what the scholar originally laid out in the abstract.

**Important note:**

Although there is not one right way to create them, abstracts in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) tend to be structured very differently than those in the Arts and Humanities simply because STEM research processes, and thus reports, are highly consistent and usually formulaic: title, abstract, introduction, materials and methods, results, discussion, conclusions, acknowledgements, and literature cited. While abstracts for Arts and Humanities also tend to include several common elements (see below), you may notice more variety in them.

### **How to Write an Abstract:**

**The paper or presentation abstract typically contains the following six elements (which are adapted from from <http://theprofessorisin.com>):**

- 1) a big picture problem or topic widely debated in your field
- 2) a gap in the literature/scholarship on this topic
- 3) your project that fills this gap
- 4) the specific material that you examine in the paper
- 5) your original argument
- 6) a strong concluding sentence

**Each of these six elements is usually contained in a single sentence:**

Sentence 1: Big picture topic that is debated in your field, possibly with reference to specific scholars and/or previously published literature.

*Example wording:* “The question of xxxx has been widely debated in the field of xxxx, with scholars such as xxxx and xxxx arguing xxxx.”

Sentence 2: Gap in the literature on this topic. This gap in knowledge is a problem. (You might also use this space to explain why.) This is one of the key sentences of the abstract.

*Example wording:* “However, these works/articles/arguments/perspectives have not adequately addressed the issue of xxxx.”

Sentence 3: Your project fills this gap. (You might also use this space to explain how.)

*Example wording:* “My paper addresses the issue of xxxx with special attention to xxxx.”

Sentence 4+ (length here depends on the word limit of the abstract; this is a place to expand, if necessary): The specific material that you are examining:

data, texts, theories, scholars, etc. as well as the approach you are taking toward that material (i.e., what methods or approaches you are using).

*Example wording:* “Specifically, in my project, I will be looking at xxxx and xxxx, in order to show xxxx. I will discuss xxxx and xxxx, and juxtapose them against xxxx and xxxx, in order to reveal the previously misunderstood connections between xxxx and xxxx.”

Sentence 5: Your main argument and contribution, clearly and concisely stated.

*Example wording:* “I argue that xxxx...”

Sentence 6: Strong conclusion!

*Example wording:* “In conclusion, this project, by closely examining xxxx, sheds new light on the neglected/little recognized/rarely acknowledged issue of xxxx by arguing xxxx.”