

Introduction to the Abstracts Volume

“I would have written a shorter letter, but I did not have the time.”

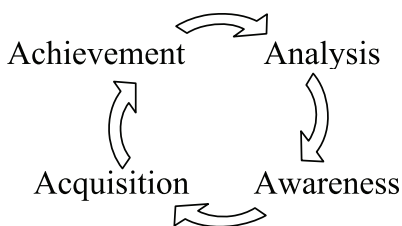
—Blaise Pascal, French philosopher, 1657

A variety of abstracts and summaries are widely used in the research world. In this small volume, we aim to offer help with the composing of most of them. Abstracts typically have restrictions with regard to the number of words, and these limits make the already difficult task of constructing abstracts even harder. Even experienced and widely published authors usually have to produce several versions before they are satisfied that they have summarized their longer texts with maximum efficiency, clarity, and economy.

This book therefore is designed to help graduate students and junior researchers with their abstracts. In addition, some tasks in this volume have been designed with the needs of those whose mother tongue is not English in mind. The book, or relevant parts of it, can be used in advanced writing classes, in workshops, or in seminars, or it can be used by individuals working on their own. With the last group particularly in mind, the *Commentary* offers possible answers to the less open tasks and some further notes on relevant points (see www.press.umich.edu/esl/compsite/ETRW/.)

The approach we have adopted in this new series is broadly the same as that used in our earlier textbooks: *Academic Writing for Graduate Students* (2d ed., 2004) and *English in Today's Research World: A Writing Guide* (1998). This can be summarized by this simple wheel diagram:

Figure 2. The Four-A Wheel



We know that users of this volume will be highly educated and will have developed high levels of analytic skills in their own disciplinary fields. We make use of these skills by asking you to undertake various kinds of linguistic and rhetorical analysis, often by comparing some features of a text from a different field with what you know or can discover about texts in your own area. We believe that these comparisons lead to a greater awareness and understanding of how research English is constructed, which then provide a platform for further acquisition of specific writing skills. These in turn lead to your texts becoming more easily acceptable to members of your target disciplinary community or communities.

A Crucial First Step

Okay, you have to write an abstract. You perhaps need to do this to accompany a journal article, or to submit an abstract for an upcoming conference, or you have nearly finished your thesis or dissertation. Alternatively, you have been accepted for a conference (congratulations!), and you now have to come up with a short version to be published in the program.

Naturally, the first step is to find out how many words (or sometimes characters) you have to work with. Here are some general guidelines for four different types of abstract:

- Most journals seem to ask for between 150 and 200 words for traditional abstracts (i.e., for those without subheadings). Structured abstracts—those divided into a number of named sections—can be longer. For example, the publishers of *Emerald Journals*, which require structured abstracts for all the articles they publish—have a maximum limit of 250 words.¹
- Abstracts for U.S. PhD dissertations should not exceed 350 words.
- Conference submission abstracts in some fields may be longer, 500 words or more.

¹ Traditional and structured abstracts are just the names for two abstract formats. We, of course, do not wish to imply that traditional abstracts are somehow “unstructured.” Emerald celebrated its 40th anniversary in 2007 and publishes more than 180 journals, mostly in management fields.

- The IEEE (Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers) asks for 50-word abstracts for “short communications” published in its many journals. Published conference program abstracts can also be as short as this.

This list of guidelines, of course, offers only generalizations. In any particular case, you need to check the word—or character—limits. These days, the simplest way to do this is to go to the appropriate website. If you might be submitting a manuscript to a journal, don't forget to check whether a structured abstract is required.

In this volume, we will deal with traditional research article (RA) abstracts first, followed by a shorter section on structured abstracts. Then we will move on to conference abstracts and short program summaries. These in turn are followed by a quick look at dissertation abstracts. Toward the end we deal with titles, the ordering of author names, and keywords. We will not be dealing with abstracts found in abstracting journals or databases such as MEDLINE in the medical field or LLBA in our own field of language studies. Many of these use special conventions and are typically prepared by professional abstract writers. Therefore, they are beyond the scope of this volume. We also do not deal in this volume with abstracts or summaries accompanying research grant proposals.