

HOW TO WRITE AN ABSTRACT

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- ! When preparing an abstract of a work you did not write yourself, the abstract should be preceded by a complete bibliographical citation in a format approved by your instructor.

- ! When preparing an abstract of your own paper, it should be on a page by itself entitled “Abstract.” The abstract page should follow immediately after a title page, which includes the title of your paper, your name, the date, and the course for which the paper was written.

- ! Your job is to provide a synopsis of the original pared down to its essential elements. Your abstract should present the book, article, chapter, or your own paper in microcosm.

- ! Because the abstract is the original work in microcosm, it follows that the structure of the abstract ought to parallel the structure of the original work.
 - " In serious scholarly articles that structure will often be in the form of
 - review of the relevant literature
 - hypothesis
 - methods employed to test the hypothesis
 - results
 - " In the case of a policy paper you have written for class that structure will often be in the form of
 - your policy recommendation
 - arguments on behalf of your policy recommendation

- ! Abstracts are generally subject to specific word limits, so it is important to focus on the main ideas and to choose your words carefully. Abstracts are an exercise in writing with precision and efficiency. No abstract can substitute for reading the original work, but you should try to represent the original as clearly and completely as you can within the limitations.

- ! When you are not the author of the book, article or chapter abstracted, it follows that the abstract or synopsis has nothing to do with you. A good synopsis would not include the fact that you read it or any information about how you responded to it. In short, your job is to summarize the article itself, not your thoughts or feelings about it.

- ! Because the author and title of the abstracted work already appear in the bibliographical entry which precedes the abstract (or on the title page in your own work), mention of the author(s) is generally a waste of words. Abstracts are better without author references like, “Gerald Peterson, professor of political science at Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, concludes that,” or “O’Reilly stated,” or “In the opinion of Rand and McNally” or “In this paper I argue.”

- ! An abstract is one of those places where the passive voice can be quite useful. E.g., “Each of 126 welfare recipients were interviewed before and after meeting with their caseworkers.”