

The Abstract

An abstract is a short and succinct but powerful statement that characterizes your research and its import. Writing abstracts can be challenging because they are usually between 200 and 500 words.

There are actually three elements to consider:

Title Abstract Keywords

First, you need a catchy but pithy title that alludes to the your results – one that preferably avoids jargon, neologisms, etc. (no longer than 12 or so words, ideally less). Titles should:

- Predict content
- Be catchy or have a “hook”
- Reflect the tone or slant of the study
- Have appropriate keywords

Metadata: consider that abstracts and titles will be searched by databases; thus, think carefully about relevant keywords.

Paper titles should inform and persuade: NOT obfuscate.
Do not permit your title to descend into jargon-theory-speak.
For example:

“Discursivity as Production: The Hypervisibility and Interagentivity of Enunciative Performance in Positioning the Post-Colonial Female Body as a Charged Site of Cultural Contestation in Constructing ‘Hybrid’ Subjectivities”

or:

“The Dynamics of Interbeing and Monological Imperatives in *Dick and Jane: A Study in Psychic Transrelational Gender Modes*”
(from Calvin & Hobbes)

or (on the other end of the spectrum):

“Latin American Politics”

Second: the abstract. Jargon & etc. is not helpful in abstracts, either. Here, you want to be as clear and concise as possible, and you have very few words to do so—don't waste them.

Different venues for abstracts:

- An already-written study (paper in hand; dissertation or thesis; for publication): keyword choices are important here for indexing purposes.
- A study yet to be written (typically a conference paper): keywords are equally important here.

Either type should succinctly address the following issues:

- Set the stage with a big-picture statement regarding a particular question/problem or a topic that's widely debated in the field. This implies that something is overlooked: a gap in the literature. This is also a "why we should care" statement.
- Address how your work approaches the question/problem and/or fills a gap in the field (this could be new sources, methodologies, etc., which lead to the next issue)
- Address the sources, data, and/or materials you employ in your study (new archival materials, analytics, objects, case studies, etc.)
- State your original argument and contribution
- Provide a strong concluding sentence as to the outcome(s) and implications

The short form might look like this:

Problem statement: why we should care [purpose]

Thesis statement

Methodology/approach + sources/materials [methods]

Results/outcomes/implications

Then, weed out extraneous phrases and hone in on the essential.

Consider your audience:

Re-read, and imagine that if this abstract were the only part of the paper someone could access, would they understand the basic argument of your study and why it is important? Would they be motivated to go hear your paper or read your article, dissertation, etc.?

For conference papers, consider the type of conference (small and focused or large and multi/interdisciplinary) and the fact that people will read abstracts to determine whether they want to invest their time in hearing your paper. The same is true for abstracts of articles, dissertations, theses, etc. You have labored long on your topic—highlight the relevance, innovations, and import of your work, and make people want to read it!

MODELS: look at examples of abstracts in your field or from the conference or journal to which you are sending the abstract. Typically, these are available online.

Example for unpacking:

Knapp, James A. "Ocular Proof": Archival Revelations and Aesthetic Response." *Poetics Today* 24.4 (2003): 695-727. Print.

A new materialism in literary and cultural criticism has regrounded much scholarly debate in the archive as a corrective to ahistorical theorizing. Often, in granting archival discoveries the evidentiary status of fact, historical criticism fails to attend to the difficulties surrounding the mediation of historical understanding by material things. In order to get at the thorny issues surrounding the material as an authorizing category in cultural analysis, I focus on Shakespeare's well-known literary meditation on visual proof (and visual perception) in *Othello*. Reemphasizing the problems that nag materialist epistemologies, I examine the role of material (ocular) proof in *Othello*, in the form of the much discussed handkerchief. Drawing on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's ontology of perception, I argue that *Othello* provides a parable about the disaster of confusing the objecthood of things with the stories we tell about them. I conclude that as cultural history moves into its next phase - beyond the return to the archive - it must respond to the phenomenological challenge and avoid the temptation to stop with either thing or theory, always working to occupy the space between.

Blue = situation via state of knowledge in the field

Red = Statement of problem

Green = method

Purple = thesis

Excerpted from: <http://www4.ncsu.edu/unity/users/m/morillo/public/abstractex.htm>

Aspects of the guidelines in the above pages were culled and interpreted from: <https://theprofessorisin.com/2011/07/12/how-today-how-to-write-a-paper-abstract/> <http://hsp.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/HOW%20TO%20WRITE%20AN%20ABSTRACT.pdf> and my own experience and perspectives.