

How to Write an Abstract

Where does it fit? – The abstract is the first component of a report. In some cases an extended abstract is the only component of a report. It is normally preceded by the title and authors and followed by an introduction.

Before Writing – Determine the role of the abstract and the audience. In all cases an abstract contains a brief summary of the components normally found in a report (IMRaD) but the level of detail differs depending on the purpose. Abstracts can range from being limited in word count to 100 words or less to 2 page extended abstracts with figures.

- **Timing** – Write the rest of the report before writing the abstract. If the abstract stands alone, start with the results, move to the conclusion, then the introduction and methods part of the abstract.
- **Message** – Who will be reading your abstract? What background or prior knowledge do they have relative to the work being reported?
- **Content** – What level of detail is needed? This is often specified by the person asking for the document.
- **Style** – Is the style consistent with the purpose of the report. Is the style formal or informal? Authoritative or weak. Typically the abstract is formal and authoritative.

While Writing – An abstract summarizes the substance of your work. It provides a condensed discussion of all the important points (IMRaD). The abstract is typically read to determine if the content of the report is important enough to read in detail or to provide a quick summary of all important information. As such it is often the only component of a report that is read and therefore the content must be worded carefully and precisely.

- The abstract contains at least one sentence and usually not more than three sentences on each component of a report (Introduction, Objective, Methods, Results, Discussion, and Conclusions)
- Include numerical results matching those in the full report. Be specific not general. Restate conclusions.
- If you intend for the abstract to be part of your report, you need not include the title or author of the report in the abstract. If the abstract will replace the full report for some readers, the title and the author should be included at the beginning. Abstracts followed by full reports normally contain 100 - 200 words or less. They fit on a single page of double-spaced text.

After Writing –

- Check for consistency between objectives, methods, results, and conclusions as stated in the abstract and as written in the text of the report.
- Check to see that all conclusions made in the text are repeated in the abstract.
- Check to see if the abstract is within the length limits set by the person requesting the report.