

Lecture 12.

12. Writing Abstracts and Summaries

12.1 Crafting concise abstracts and summaries for research papers.

12.2. Overall structure Summary and an Abstract

12.3 Process for writing an abstract

12.4 Context of executive summaries

Summary and an Abstract

Writing for an abstract may have similar steps to writing for a summary, but they have different objectives and requirements. While an abstract is a short, descriptive paragraph overviewing your entire paper from introduction to the findings or future studies, a summary includes your entire paper and its visuals, just in a shorter length and more concise than it's original document. This article will discuss the key parts to include in an abstract and a summary.

Abstract

The abstract should summarize the main points of your paper without specific detail. So it should communicate, if relevant: main question of your paper, methods, major results or findings, the importance of results or findings, and how they shape a theory or answer your question.

-Start with the main point: The beginning statement should describe the main point you are trying to communicate to the reader. Sometimes, this may be the thesis, or it may be the research topic, all depending on what kind of paper you are writing.

-Keep it concise: This is meant to briefly discuss your article, and only talk about the main points between the introduction, body, and conclusion.

-Remember the length: This abstract is meant to be a paragraph; therefore, each piece of information given in the summary should be short, key parts of the article.

-Follow the same order: Make sure your abstract follows the same order that your paper is written in.

-Keep it to the facts: Keep in mind to only use factual statements or observations and avoid using opinions, repetition, and any 'fluff' content.

-Create an effective ending: The last sentence should be able to effectively wrap up the findings of the article.

Summary

On the other hand, the summary is a much longer version of the abstract, containing more details, visuals, and opinions.

-Follow the same order: Again, this should follow the same order as your paper.

-Keep in mind the length: Remember the length that the publication is asking your article to be at. With publishing for *MiMJ*, we are asking for a 2-3 page, 1000 word limit. With this, try to be concise and only have information that is key to conveying your message in your paper.

-Facts and opinions allowed: Unlike writing for an abstract, you are not limited to what kind of information you will be giving; you can include any fact, opinion, or finding, as long as it is a key piece of information that still allows your paper to be concise.

-You can use visuals: The use of visuals is welcomed while writing your summary. However, make sure they are necessary to convey your message to the reader due to the fact that summaries need to be concise (do you think I mentioned that your summary needs to be concise enough?). Secondly, make sure each visual that is used is explained well, as summaries are for a general audience.

-Remember the format: You still have to organize your paper in the format that is required by the publication you wish to publish your article with. With publishing with *MiMJ*, we require your paper to be written in 7th edition APA format.

-Remember your citations: As any paper would include, citations are an important way to credit the sources you used to create your wonderful paper. In addition, make sure your citations abide by the format you are using. This also ties in having a literature cited page as well.

This section first presents the purpose and features of abstracts and continues with showing the similarities of and differences between an **abstract** and an **executive summary**. Whether you write an abstract or an executive summary: they go at the

front of your report, so they are the part your readers see first. However, they are written last.



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Abstracts

Abstracts in published papers – and in reports or other manuscripts for your studies – have the following purpose: help potential readers decide quickly which articles are relevant to their needs, and worth looking at in more detail. Abstracts are now part of data bases which allow researchers to search and scan scientific literature. Some readers might only be interested in following up research done in their field without having to read the details. Abstracts ‘compete for attention in on-line databases’ (Glasman-Deal, 2010, p.197).

Purpose of abstracts: concise overview of

- Why you did the work;
- What you did and how you did it; and
- The main results and conclusions.

Typical abstracts:

- are short, usually less than 150 or 200 words, or 4-10 sentences.
- contain only the most important information.
- contain stand-alone qualities: they are like a miniature version of your work and can be understood without reading the paper.
- are mostly written in an impersonal style.
- do *not* contain figures, tables or quotations or references.
- do *not* contain abbreviations and acronyms.
- *never* refer to chapters, figures or tables contained within the report.

Overall structure

Since abstracts are mostly parts of scientific papers or reports they follow this model:

Background	1-2 introductory sentences place the work in context.
Problem/ Purpose	Brief description of the problem of the investigation and on the objectives of the work.
Method/materials	Outline of the methodology and tools used, how the study was undertaken.
Results/ implications/ applications	1-2 sentences stating the most important results and conclusions and/or recommendations and/or applications.

Process for writing an abstract

- abstracts are best written last or at least after a substantive part of the report is finished
- use the overall structure above as an outline
- start with key words for each section and then a first draft of your abstract
- refine your first draft a few days later, consolidating and reducing the text until you feel you have described all essential elements using as few words as possible



Language focus

Abstracts use *impersonal* language using either phrases such as ‘*this paper investigates* (not: we investigated), or *passive voice*.

Start the abstract with **present tense** (this paper *investigates*, *aims at*...)

For the **methodology** you can use **present tense** but it is more common to use **past tense** (a comparison *is, was made*... The data obtained are, *were evaluated using*...)

Results are expressed either in **present** or **past tense** (a significant difference between XY *shows*, This *correlated* with...); often a combination of present and past tense is adequate when pointing to conclusions (the results *showed* that there is...)

Applications are often stated in **present tense** (this result *can be applied to*...)



Vocabulary for abstracts (adapted from Glasman-Deal, 2010)

Background	<i>a number of studies/ it is assumed/ it is widely known/ recent research</i>
Aim	<i>the aim of this study/ with the aim of/ to investigate, compare, examine</i>
Problem	<i>a need for/ drawback, disadvantage/ inaccurate, impractical, limited, time-consuming</i>
What the paper does	<i>(in) this study/paper/investigation/ adress(es), analyse(s), argue(s), compare(s), consider(s), dicuss(es), examine(s), extend(s), introduce(s), present(s), proposes(s), show(s)</i>
Method/materials	<i>was/were assembled, calculated, constructed, evaluated, formulated, measured, modelled, performed, studied, treated, used</i>
Results	<i>caused/decreased/had no effect/ it was noted, observed that.../ was/were achieved, found, identical, observed, present, unaffected</i>
Implications	<i>the evidence/ these results indicate(s), mean(s), suggest(s)</i>
Applications	<i>applicability/ can be applied, used/ make it possible to/ potential use/ relevant for,in</i>

Abstract or Executive Summary?

The main differences between an *abstract* and an *executive summary* are **audience** and **purpose**.

An **executive summary**, sometimes known as a **management summary**, is a short document or section of a document, usually produced for business purposes, summarizing a longer report or proposal or a group of related reports, in such a way that readers can rapidly become acquainted with a large body of material without having to read it all. It will usually contain a brief statement of the problem or proposal covered in the major document(s), background information, concise analysis and main conclusions.

An executive summary seeks to lead the reader to the significant points of the report as the reader is a decision maker who will have the responsibility of deciding on

some issue(s) related to the report. The executive summary must be written with this need in mind.

Context of executive summaries

Engineers often have to communicate highly technical issues and concepts to clients in a manner that clients can understand and use the information, e.g. to improve their business processes. Means of communication is normally a written report.

High-level executives are usually interested in getting to the 'bottom line' without wading through many details. Most clients prefer an *executive summary* at the beginning of the report, where they find an outline of the situation, how the problem is being solved, planned activities, findings and recommendations. The remainder of the report contains the detailed analysis enabling the reader to gain more insight into any of the summary points, including flowcharts, tables, charts and other graphical means.

Research and report writing are common activities in business. They can be used to develop procedures, test products, explore markets or gather opinions. The results of research may be reported orally or in writing, to internal or external audiences. Therefore, knowing your audience, applying the principles of business communication and selecting an appropriate format are also instrumental in preparing understandable, usable reports.

Types of business reports which often contain an executive summary: general business report/ business plan/ business proposal/ marketing plan/ strategic plan/ business analysis/ project report/ project review/ financial plan.

Executive summary

The executive summary is a brief version of the report; it restates each section of the report in abbreviated form with emphasis on findings, conclusions, and recommendations. Executive summaries *are standalone* documents. The reader must be fully informed.

A **typical** executive summary will:

- be possibly 5-10% or so of the length of the main report (this can be 10 pages for a report of 200 pages)

- be written in language appropriate for the target audience
- consist of short and concise paragraphs
- often have similar headings as the full report
- be written in the same order as the main report
- only include material present in the main report
- make recommendations
- have a conclusion
- be able to be read separately from the main report
- exclude references
- mostly exclude tables/ figures (maybe 1 or 2 are ok)

Overall structure of executive summaries

The structure depends on the document it summarizes. Therefore, this *could* be similar to an abstract but mostly contains more information:

- situation, context, background (what is the document about? Why is it important?)
- procedures/ methods/ materials
- findings/ solutions to a problem/ implications/ applications/ recommendations
- outlook

Process for writing an executive summary

- think about your **audience** (knowledge, interest)
- use the structure above as an outline or follow the structure of your document
- identify key sentences in the report
- extract them
- edit them for readability



Activity: look at the examples of a good and poor executive summary. What exactly makes the difference? Compare your results

References

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<https://ebooks.hslu.ch/academicwriting/chapter/4-1-abstract-executive-summary/>