

# Writing a Conference Abstract

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## Some Suggestions and Common Errors

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This article draws on my experiences on the WPA program review committee and from years of collaborating with students on abstract submissions. I describe the WPA review process, present general abstract guidelines, and make a number of suggestions for writing better abstracts. Although I direct this piece at students, faculty may find it useful as well. Much of what I present is my opinion; other reviewers and experienced abstract writers might disagree with at least some of my suggestions.

### Rating System

For abstracts submitted to WPA, two reviewers provide quality ratings. The top rating is *excellent*. Student abstracts in this category are recommended for a scholarship. The remaining categories are *very good*, *average*, *below average* (accept if there is space), and *poor* (do not recommend inclusion). I rate most abstracts between *very good* and *below average*. Nearly every abstract I read could be stronger.

### General Guidelines

Good abstracts demonstrate work based on solid theory or previous research, present clear hypotheses, demonstrate sound methodology, and meaningfully interpret results. That is a lot of information. However, abstracts are short, so you need to get to the point quickly. The main point is what *you* did, so the bulk of your abstract needs to reflect *your* work rather than details about previous work or theory that lead to your study. Tell the reader what you did, what you found, and why your results are important.

Try to keep the theory and hypotheses (i.e., the Introduction) portion to no more than 20% of the allocated word count. Remember, the focus is what you did rather than what others did to motivate your work. Present only the most central information. For example, if two competing theories suggest different predictions, summarize each in a single sentence rather than summarizing empirical support for both perspectives. To keep the section short, leave aside details about previous studies, excessive citations, and extended discussions of theory.

Keep descriptions of your method to no more than 20% of the word count, as well. To ensure brevity and focus, leave out information that does not add substance. For example, noting that a scale ranged from 1 (*not at all likely*) to 7 (*very likely*), and statements like, “this work was approved by the IRB,” “following the study, we debriefed participants,” or “participants received extra credit for their time,” take up space and do not add importantly.

Make your primary focus your results and their interpretation. Tell the reader clearly and directly what you did and why your findings are important. Even though you devote more space to this section, most writers find it difficult to detail every aspect of analysis and interpretation in so little space. A useful strategy here is to focus on the highlights of your analyses. Do not be afraid to scale back presentation of hypotheses (e.g., include only one of four) or provide only one of several analyses that support a particular hypothesis.

**Length.** WPA abstracts have a 350-word limit; use most, if not all, of those words. I often evaluate short abstracts less positively than those that are longer, as the authors often include too little information. If you go

over the word count, the online submission system will cut off your abstract; reviewers end up seeing an abstract that ends abruptly. Most importantly, a word limit means that you need to make every word count.

**Abstracts should represent completed research.** Most poster submissions describe empirical work that has been completed. We do recognize that research may not be complete when submitted in November. However, it is expected that there will be data collection and results ready for the conference. If you are planning to do a study but have not started, you should not submit an abstract. Sometimes a study that is underway in November and accepted for the convention does not come to fruition. These types of posters that do not reflect data collection and results are not acceptable and should be withdrawn. Note: Some submissions reflect work that is not empirical, e.g., a new perspective on a topic in the history of psychology. This is perfectly acceptable when the work represents a significant contribution to the topic. What is not acceptable are submissions based on a student library research paper for a class or independent study project.

**Citations.** I do not recommend use of citations in the text of the abstract. I think it is fine to refer to a specific theory by name while leaving out the authorship citation. If you feel uncomfortable not citing, limit yourself to one or two critical references. Regardless of whether you cite or not, abstracts should not include a references section, as there is far too little space.

**Statistics.** I appreciate presentation of statistical values, but a good summary often does not need extensive statistical presentation. Be sure to present the most central analyses and leave ancillary results to the poster itself. Do not overwhelm the reader with analysis after analysis. More importantly, do not leave it up to the reader to draw conclusions from your statistics. Clear, plain English explanations of results are essential and likely worth a point or two on the rating scale.

On the technical side, statistical symbols do not translate well on the web submission form. Standard letters like  $F$  come across fine, but the online submission system garbles values like  $R^2$ ,  $X^2$ , and  $\eta^2$  (anything with a Greek symbol or sub/superscript). Spell out values (e.g., R-squared, Chi-squared, Eta-squared) to ensure readers understand the statistic. When reporting statistics, be sure to use APA format (with the exceptions noted above) and always include effect sizes.

**Planned analyses.** A pet peeve of mine is the planned analysis. Completed work means you completely analyzed your data and can draw reasonable conclusions about the results. However, if you are just beginning to collect data, you can present preliminary data or if needed present very precise descriptions of your expected results. Be aware that studies without complete data analysis receive lower ratings by reviewers.

**Participants.** A shocking number of abstracts report data without any reference to the number of participants. You can easily place sample size in your abstract. For example, "Participants ( $n = 160$ ) completed measures of self-esteem and forgiveness."

**In-progress work.** Despite my belief that abstracts should represent completed work, many submissions reflect in-progress research. Although opinions differ, I suggest that if you submit in-progress work, you should completely analyze data, base conclusions on the data you have, and make no promises about collecting more information. Reviewers will determine if you have enough data for a positive evaluation.

**Revising and proofreading.** Proofread your abstract! No matter how good the research, your explanation of it needs to be clear and written well. Ask *several* people (especially faculty) to read and comment on it. When I work with students, I generally go through five or more revisions with them. Of course, this is only possible if you give yourself enough time. When I review abstracts, I automatically knock work with spelling mistakes or poor grammar down one point in the rating system.

**Submitting your presentation online.** When you submit your presentation on the WPA website, it is a very good idea to have a word processing document open that contains all information that you will need. You can then copy/paste the information into the online forms. You should have the name, affiliation (usually a university or college), and email address of all authors. You also need a phone number for the person who should be contacted if there are questions. Of course, you will need the title of your paper and the abstract. Everything should be typed exactly as you want it to appear in the official convention program. Make sure that all the information has been carefully proofread for spelling and grammar. Check with all authors for how they want their names listed. In general, you should not abbreviate the names of colleges and universities; however, there are some abbreviations that are commonly used for California universities (e.g., UCLA is acceptable, UC followed by the city for other campuses such as UC Santa Barbara, CSU followed by the campus name such as CSU Channel Islands or CSU Los Angeles). You can use the abbreviation or the full spelling for these universities. Do not abbreviate or truncate spelling for other colleges or universities.

**Presenting your work.** I tell my students that the second they submit their abstract, they have committed to presenting at the conference. You should absolutely view a submission as a promise to present if accepted, so begin planning to attend the conference as soon as you complete your abstract.