

How to write an abstract?

As many of you might not yet have written an abstract, here are some ideas on how to do...

The abstract for a humanities paper is generally unstructured (not divided into specific sections: Introduction, Methods, Results, etc.). It usually consists of one to three paragraphs that give a succinct overview of the content and scope of the project. As there is a limited word count, which in this case should not be exceeded, you must make sure that you include only what is necessary and relevant.

The abstract is an important element of the research project / dissertation, and might become a document in its own right if the thesis would be registered within any database.

An abstract can be written as a proposal for the research (as done here as an aid to identifying the crucial main thread of your research, its purpose, and its findings, which could then guide the structure of the dissertation) or as part of the dissertation thesis. In the latter, it can be best to write the Abstract last, once you are sure what exactly you are summarising. It is certainly an academic exercise, but perhaps not too different from the concise explanations of your research you may have had to give to peers or relatives and neighbours, in terms of its brevity, accessibility, and comprehensiveness.

Although it is so short, the abstract should summarize already known information about all sections of your study, including your thesis, goals, approach, sources, main findings, and conclusions. This will outline your research and will give you a nice achievable framework.

Make sure you include the following elements in your abstract:

1. Statement of purpose: Why did you choose to conduct this study? Why is the problem significant? What gap exists in previous literature that your research aims to fill?
2. Methods or approach: What did you actually do to get your results?
3. Sources: What did you analyse?
4. Results: What did you learn or find as result of conducting these procedures?
5. Conclusions: How are your findings significant? What are the larger implications of your findings, and how do they relate to the gap in research that you have identified?

As you are writing this abstract before you actually have done most of the work/research, it will be a kind of wish list. It nevertheless needs to be a realistic description of what you aim and can do within the next months in addition to your normal teaching.

Follow the '3Cs' rule

CLEAR: is what you have written intelligible and clearly articulated? Does it make sense, or is it vague and confusing? Does your abstract leave the reader with a clear sense of the purpose and direction of your research project?

CONCISE: have you written your abstract in a succinct and focussed way?

COHERENT: does your proposal link together well so that it tells the reader a short story about what you want to do, why you want to do it and how you will do it?

FINALLY: When you have written your abstract, ask a friend to read it critically and provide you with feedback.