

What is a conference paper abstract and how do I write one?

There is lots of advice on how to write a conference paper abstract available on the Internet. Here is one example, but feel free to look for alternatives, or ask Dr Jane Draycott.

How to Prepare a Conference Paper Abstract

[Adapted from a blog post by Dr Liz Gloyn on *Classically Inclined* – this blog is an excellent resource for Classics-related subjects: <http://lizgloyn.wordpress.com/2011/06/06/how-to-write-a-conference-abstract/>]

First, pick your conference. Find a call for papers (or CFP) that looks interesting and relevant to your research. Classicists should keep an eye on the Liverpool classics e-mail list and Rogue Classicism. Other good sources are the Women's Classical Caucus e-mail list (membership is very reasonable!), and the American Philological Association CFP page.

[In this case, your conference is the School of Humanities Student Conference]

Study the CFP carefully to see if your work fits. Make sure that whatever you are planning to submit to the conference fits within the specifics of the CFP. For instance, in the graduate student conference I ran, our CFP clearly stated that we were looking for papers dealing with contemporary popular culture (broadly defined). When we got an abstract for a paper which looked at material from the 1850s, we found it easy to rule that particular abstract out, as interesting as it sounded – it didn't fit the theme we had outlined in the CFP. This doesn't mean you should never take a risk with something a bit outside the CFP, but be warned that it might work against you.

[In this case, the conference theme is 'Places, Spaces and Environments']

Study the CFP carefully for key information. In particular, find the word limit for your abstract. In Classics, this is normally 300 words, although you might see 250 or 400. Also check for any other requirements, like what to do if you will need to project a PowerPoint presentation; how long your talk should be; the deadline for submission; and how to submit your abstract. This may be by e-mailing the abstract to the conference organisers or a central e-mail address, or via an on-line system.

[In this case, the word limit is 1000 words - 500 words for the conference paper abstract and 500 words for the selective bibliography]

Focus your argument. The CFP should tell you how long your talk should be for this particular conference. Make sure that the paper you propose can fit into that length of time. If you only have fifteen minutes, don't propose to talk about your entire thesis. Pick an appropriately-sized chunk of one chapter (or of an article) that will stand up as an argument on its own. Alternatively, try to hone your central point to fit within the time limit. Your abstract has to sound as if it is feasible for the allotted time, or else it doesn't stand a chance.

Be bold in your opening sentence. An abstract doesn't allow for the kind of modest contextualisation of your work that you might do when you write your dissertation chapters. You have a limited number of words to convince the conference organisers that your work is interesting, that it makes a fresh contribution to scholarship, and that your argument stands up. This is not the moment to be modest. The first sentence of your abstract has to be a hook to draw your readers into the rest of your first paragraph.

Be bold in your opening paragraph. Your opening paragraph should lay out your argument and what new intervention you are going to make. The conference organisers shouldn't have to get to your last sentence of your abstract to find out what you are arguing – they should know by the time they've read that crucial first paragraph. Subsequent paragraphs should show what evidence you will use to prove your case, but be explicit about saying what that case will be early on.

Be clear what you are doing that's new. I know I've already made this point, but it's worth repeating. Be explicit about how what you are doing is new and interesting for the field. Imagine you are writing for a conference attendee reading your abstract in a conference program, and that you are trying to convince them why they want to listen to your paper. If you aren't clear about why what your paper will say is interesting and why people should want to hear it, then the conference organisers aren't going to know why they should ask attendees to listen to it.

Don't get too bogged down in detail. You only have a limited number of words, and each of them is precious. Save the direct quotations for the talk handout. Make sure you keep background information in the background, so your contribution can take centre stage.

Stick to the word limit. Hopefully self-explanatory. It's there for a reason. Ignoring the word limit makes it look as if you don't have any respect for the conference organisers and the guidelines they've set, and that's not a good impression to make.

Use the word limit. If you have been given 1000 words, then use them. Don't send in an abstract of 150 words. It won't stand up well against other abstracts that are using all the words at their disposal to make a convincing argument.

Draft and revise, revise, revise. Writing an abstract takes time. Be ready to go through numerous drafts, especially if writing concisely is a new skill for you. Writing abstracts is an art, and it takes time to learn it. The better formed your idea, and the more focused your idea, the easier it will be to write a convincing first draft – but even the most convincing first draft will benefit from being put to one side and being revisited in a couple of days.

Ask for feedback. You need to have other people's opinions on your abstract before you submit it. You may be so close to your research that you think what you have written makes perfect sense – but when you show it to someone else in your field, they may be completely baffled, and point out that you've failed to explain how you've made the logical jump from point A to point B. You can't risk the conference organisers having the same trouble understanding your argument. The more people you can get to look at your abstract the better – even more so if you can get reviewers from different areas of your discipline, or even different academic subjects.

You want their opinion on the packaging of your idea, not the idea itself, and in some ways people who aren't experts in your particular subfield are better at providing that kind of constructive criticism.

Give yourself time for revisions. Don't think you can write a good abstract in the afternoon before the deadline. The process of getting other people's input and making sure your argument is crystal clear to any reader takes time – and you need to put that time in.

Be aware that some conferences have their own conventions for writing abstracts. The classic example of this for classicists is the American Philological Association, which asks for 650 words plus bibliography; with the higher word count, they also want much more detail about the argument you are going to make than you would provide in a 'normal' abstract. When submitting to this sort of conference, make sure you run your abstract past someone who has had success submitting to that conference for their advice.

Anonymise your work. Make sure that there is no identifying information on your abstract, including really obvious things like your name. If you want to remove all hidden personal data from your documents, then here are guides for doing so in Word 2007 and Word 2010.

Come up with a snappy title. This is part of the plan to make your work look interesting to others – if the title looks interesting, one presumes the paper will be too. Crowdsourcing ideas is a great way to come up with interesting paper titles if your brain refuses to think of anything suitable.

Meet the deadline. Academics are notoriously bad at remembering and meeting deadlines. Don't be one of those people. Mark your calendar, set your alarm, do whatever you have to do to make sure that your abstract gets where it needs to by the deadline. After all, it would be a shame to go to all the trouble of writing it and not actually submit it.