

Guidelines for writing abstracts

Note: these guidelines were drawn up by Johan Rooryck and Vincent van Heuven after consultation of the Linguist List: advice received is very gratefully acknowledged. Last revision: 12:11 PM on 23-04-99

1. General

- Research a conference. Get abstract booklets and proceedings from previous conferences and study them carefully. What do successful abstracts look like? What theories, data, or issues are presented and discussed? How long are the presentations? Are papers published and if so, do you retain copyright? Who will be reading the abstracts (faculty, students, specialists, generalists)?
- Conferences often have a certain focus developed from unwritten tradition. Try to create a match between your research topic and the type of conference you target.
- Ask around about the university/city hosting the conference. An untold secret is that hosting universities often nudge conference programs in a certain direction. Their faculty is certainly among the reviewers, so trying to get them interested in your work won't hurt...
- Adhere strictly to abstract guidelines and deadlines.
- Always make a one-page abstract, which is the most common standard in the industry. It concentrates the mind. Also, it is easier to expand a one-page abstract into two pages than to crunch a two-pager into one.
- Take time to write the abstract, it is harder than you think. 4-6 hours is a good start, 12 hours total not uncommon. Write it once, reread it a week later. Have others read it.

2. Contents

- Always keep in mind that abstract readers have other things to do besides figuring out what you might be talking about. You have about 3 minutes to grab the attention of the abstract reader. If you do, s/he may spend 5 more minutes pondering whether it is worth it. This may strike you as cynical or unprofessional, but hey, life is short for everyone: deal with it.
- **RULE N° 1: KEEP IT SIMPLE.**
You will never be faulted for simplicity. Present concrete, specific ideas; don't make sweeping statements about anything. Give (fully glossed) examples to illustrate claims.
- Clearly distinguish your ideas and claims from those existing in the literature. Always spend more time on presenting your ideas than on criticizing the ideas you argue against. Say which existing ideas you adopt and apply to your research topic.
- Even if the issues are complicated, present them in a simple way. If you have ten ideas and twenty arguments, only use the two best ideas or arguments. 'Best' means those ideas or arguments that make your case watertight, that can be defended and explained with clarity in the abstract, and that do not require leaps in the argumentation. Work these out carefully in short, crisp prose. Leave aside arguments that require too many assumptions, or are not yet clear in your mind, or are based on mere intuitions.
- **RULE N° 2: MAKE IT SEXY.**
An abstract is absolutely *not* one of the following: a summary of your research; an article; an introduction to an article. It should be an advertisement, a billboard that gets you onto the programme. Create a market for the goods. Convince the reader you have something to offer that is worth buying. Make it clear that you can provide one or more of the following:
 - A salient contrast in data that can(not) be explained by existing theories/analyses.
 - New data for or against an old generalization or theory.

- New and fashionable theoretical ideas applied to old theoretical problems or fresh data.
- The application of ideas from one domain of the grammar to another domain/other data.
- A (new) generalization explained by a theory.
- A theoretically insightful discussion of data that were never observed before.

Once again always use (fully glossed) examples to illustrate claims. Set important statements/generalizations apart in the text; give them a name. Make the reader salivate.

A typical abstract looks like this:

- A 4 line-paragraph to introduce the topic and your new claim about it. Your new stuff.
 - A paragraph of 4 more lines to show familiarity with previous literature, and to dispassionately criticize it on the basis of new data or theories, wrong predictions, etc.
 - The core of the abstract: Your tantalizing solutions supported by solid arguments;
 - The last 4 lines: Provide a punchline. Promise more. Show implications for the field.
- Use a title that is not too short or too long, not too cute or too fancy. The title needs to cover the contents, and it should look appealing on the program. Choose a title that is as general as possible, preferably with a theoretical claim worked into it. Although they are boring, general and informative titles combining a theoretical term with the subject of inquiry work just fine (*Optimizing Menomini stress patterns, ECM in Dutch: a minimalist account*). Puns are allowed, but don't overdo it. Remember: if the proof of the pudding is in the eating, the proof of the abstract is in the reading, not in the title.
 - Make the abstract look as if the paper is already written (cf. below; *Style*).
 - **RULE N° 3: GET FEEDBACK.**
Before sending off the abstract, get fellow researchers to read your abstract. You will learn a lot about your own ideas. What doesn't kill your ideas will make them stronger, so beg for ferocious criticism. Misunderstandings and ambiguities get clarified, bad arguments chucked out, new arguments brought in. You will be forced to be fully explicit. More importantly, you become a happier and better linguist in the process.

3. Formatting

- Stop complaining about the fact that a single page is really too short for your bright ideas and that your expansive mind cannot possibly be straightjacketed into a 6-by-9 inch surface. See it as a challenge similar to painting a landscape on a grain of rice...
- Put all examples/generalizations on a separate line; make them visually salient by using a spacing just slightly larger than line spacing. Put more than one example on a single line only if the result is easy to parse visually. Check numbering several times and then once more. Don't put your examples on a separate page, even when the abstract guidelines allow you to do so: abstract reviewers hate having to go back and forth between pages... Use the second page allowed for examples to give references instead.
- Take advantage of the entire surface of the page. Too short looks as bad as too long.
- Put your title in a header outside the main text.
- Use paragraphs and indents to separate blocks of texts visually, with a spacing slightly larger than line spacing. If possible, give short titles to paragraphs which set them apart.
- Do not leave dangling lines which only contain two or three words. Try everything to 'pull back' those three words onto the preceding line: delete superfluous words in the preceding lines; change and shorten preceding sentences in the paragraph. In this way, you will gain an extra line to fill with information that is really essential.

- When all else fails and only then: some wordprocessors will allow you to crunch your abstract to between 92 and 99% of the original. You will gain a line or so, and the result won't be visible in the font... But this is cheating, really.

4. Style

- Create reading 'flow': the reader should be able to read the text at one go, without having to go back and forth to check arguments or assumptions. Beware: since you are too familiar with the subject, you will not be able to determine on your own whether your text has 'flow'. Have someone else read the text for you with 'flow' in mind.
- Make short sentences. The shorter the better.
- Be clear and concise. Explain abbreviations at their first occurrence.
- Don't leave a single typo. It suggests general sloppiness, the wrong message.
- Give glosses and translations for all cited examples. Be consistent in the use of cited forms, interlinear glosses, and translations. Study and use e.g. the *Language* style sheet appearing in the December issue of the LSA bulletin: Latin *ovis* 'sheep' is a noun.
- Avoid using longwinded, article-like, introductory sentences and the restraintful hedges typical for articles. No future tenses: the abstract should look as if the paper is written!
It appears to be the case that ---> It appears that
We would like to advance arguments for the idea that ---> I argue that
- Avoid using adverbs and adjectives
An important and interesting result from previous research in this area shows that ---> Previous research shows that
- Avoid identifying yourself all too obviously.
As I have shown in Freckletweeter (1996a, 1996b, 1996c, 1997a, 1997b), ...
---> Freckletweeter (1996) shows that
- Use visual aids wherever they help you explain a point. One picture says more than...

See also

- the LSA Bulletin December 1998: a sample abstract at <http://www.lsadc.org/web2/dec98bul/decbulfr.htm>, follow the link "Model abstracts".

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