Health Promotion Practice

http://hpp.sagepub.com/

Published by:
⑤SAGE

http://www.sagepublications.com

On behalf of:
Society for Public Health Education

Additional services and information for *Health Promotion Practice* can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://hpp.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://hpp.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

Citations: http://hpp.sagepub.com/content/12/4/493.refs.html

>> Version of Record - Jul 5, 2011

What is This?

Abstract Art: How to Write Competitive Conference and Journal Abstracts

Melinda J. Ickes, PhD[1]
Stephen F. Gambescia, PhD, MEd, MHum, MBA, CHES[2]

Because it is one of the most commonly used and most influential factors in professional use today, writing abstracts is an important skill for all health education and promotion specialists. Abstracts are powerful 150- to 250-word "short stories" that are used as part of complete articles, grant proposals, conference presentations (papers and posters), theses, and dissertations.

Ironically, the abstract is often one of the most neglected activities of the manuscript or grant preparation process. It frequently ends up as that one last task to do before sending the work to some evaluator or reader. It is often written as an "afterthought." This is unfortunate as the abstract, according to the American Psychological Association's (APA) publication manual, ". . . can be the most important single paragraph in an article" (APA, 2009, p. 26). A single abstract, as a stand-alone response to a submission for a paper presentation or part of a full manuscript, may go through several review processes (to editor, to peer reviewers, back to editor, to copy editor, to publication) and publication's many phases, including pre-online, final hard copy, indexing, and so on.

Given the ubiquity and power of these "short stories," we are pleased to offer this *Tool of the Trade* article on the art and science of writing effective abstracts. Our goal is to describe, differentiate, and detail the components of an abstract, explain the various uses of the abstract in the health education field, and identify the "make or break" nuances involved in strategically crafting an abstract. The hope is by reading this tool closely, you will be writing better abstracts in no time.

▶ DEFINITION: ABSTRACT

- Original, concise statement or summary of work
- Brief but covers all essential work elements (Koopman, 1997)
- Varies in format depending on use/purpose/type
- Includes what you want readers to remember after details of work forgotten (University of Mississippi Writing Center [UMWC], 2011)
- Written last but most important single paragraph in a work (APA, 2009)

▶ PURPOSE

- Summarizes problem investigated, research method, major findings, discussion, implications of findings (Jordan & Zanna, 2000)
- Allows reader to decide if worth reading/hearing (Conboy-Ellis, 2007)
- Provides concise presentation of complex topic
- Lets editors, reviewers, and researchers scan many submissions quickly prior to reading full documents

[1]University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY, USA
[2]Drexel University, Philadelphia, PA, USA

Associate Editors, Tools of the Trade Department

Karen Denard Goldman, *PhD, CHES, is Co-Director of the associate's degree program in Community Health at Kingsborough Community College, City University of New York, in Brooklyn, New York, and Director of KDG Consulting, a small health education consulting enterprise.*

Kathleen Jahn Schmalz, *EdD, RN, CHES is President of NJ Medical Records Review, LLC, a legal nurse consulting firm in Paramus, New Jersey*

WHERE ABSTRACTS USED

- Journal articles
- Conference paper proposal, subsequent final publication
- Poster session proposal, subsequent final publication
- Published abstracts: stand-alone pieces on breaking work or collection on specific topic
- Proceedings publications from scientific/governmental policy/practice summits
- Doctoral dissertation/master's thesis
- Research grants
- Library references, for example, Social Science Abstracts (UMWC, 2011)

VARIETY WITHIN ABSTRACTS

- *Empirical Study:* Describes quantitative or formal qualitative information; generates new knowledge in field
- *Program/Demonstration Project:* Describes public health program; gives readers ideas for replicating work
- *Literature Review:* Survey of published work; identifies gaps/opportunities for further investigation
- *Methods:* Describes research/programmatic method
- *Best Practice:* Describes "tried and true" practice in field of health education
- *Case Study:* Describes program, process, event in great detail; often with lessons learned (successes/pitfalls)
- *Emerging Idea/Innovation:* Describes new concept/ innovative perspective on procedure, policy, practice

ABSTRACT JARGON

- *Author/Coauthor(s):* Everyone involved, from most active writer/worker, to least
- *Corresponding Author:* Author contacted about questions, status, follow-up issues
- *Evaluation Criteria:* Standards by which abstract quality measured
- *Implications:* Interpretation of findings for practitioners/ other researchers
- *Presenter:* Person(s) presenting work
- *Keywords:* (Koopman, 1997; UMWC, 2011)
  - Specific, strategically chosen words/phrases
  - Used to file/store/retrieve information
  - Facilitates keyword index searches
  - Used to assign papers to review committees/editors

ESSENTIAL ELEMENT OF ABSTRACTS

- *Title:* Use key words that answer what, who involved
- *Authors:* Affiliations, contact information
- *Background/Rationale:* One or two simple opening sentences putting work in context
- *Purpose of Research or Project:* Reason/rationale for project/research
- *Methods:* Sentences that explain how research/project was done
- *Findings/Outcomes:* Justification of your work; the results
- *Interpretations or Implications:* Potential applications/ value of findings
- *Conclusion or Summary:* "Take home messages"

ANIMATING AN ABSTRACT

Be sure that the abstract addresses
- Why?   Value/significance of subject matter/ research question
- Who?   People affected/involved in study/program
- Where?   Place of study/program
- When?   Study/project time frame (retrospective, prospective, longitudinal study)
- How?   Method used to achieve results
- So What? Practical implications of findings/work

WRITING YOUR ABSTRACT

- Overall Tips
- Study how experts do it
- Read models/templates for different types of abstracts
- Make every word count—and pay attention to word limits
- Use key nouns, meaningful descriptors, powerful action words
- Delete ancillary words
- Use active, not passive, voice
- Test clarity on reviewer; must be written for the average individual to understand
- Edit, edit, edit again
- Identify most effective/required/preferred approach:
  - *Detailed summary:* Focus on facts, figures, findings
  - *Attention grabber:* Focus on appealing to/attracting readers/session participants without giving (away) whole story (Jordan & Zanna, 2000)

Writing Titles

- Devote time to title
- Critical for reviewers
- Include keywords for capture in search
- Avoid creative/cute titles selected for perceived marketing value
- Include at least *What* (topical area), *Who* (study group/those affected)
- *Effective title:* "Drawing from Freirian empowerment methods to develop and use innovative learning maps: Increasing enrollment of uninsured children on Detroit's Eastside" (Lopez et al., 2007)
    - Incorporates answers to 5 Ws/1 H questions:
    - Why?   Increase enrollment of uninsured children
    - Who?   Uninsured children on Detroit's Eastside
    - What?   Freirian empowerment methods help develop learning maps
    - Where?   Detroit's Eastside
    - When?   Not known from title
    - How?   Drawing from Freirian empowerment methods

Selecting Keywords (Koopman, 1997)

- *Remember major goal:* Ensure abstract at top of database search results listing
- Identify six search phrases/keywords people looking for this work might use
- Use those exact phrases in abstract

Writing the Background/ Rationale/Problem Statement

- Define health problem/concern; give health issue background
- Justify research/work (Conboy-Ellis, 2007)
- Describe why problem/issue important; relevance to field; new insights

Describing Participants

- Identify people addressed, for example, individuals, families/groups, community, society, population
- Identify level of engagement, for example, individual, interpersonal, cross-cultural, worldwide
- Describe demographics, for example, sex/gender, age, race, ethnic group, occupation, geographic location

Explaining the Method

- Describe research method(s) used to achieve results
- Use easily recognized terms in area of study

Presenting Findings/Results

- Include only facts; no interpretation
- State what you actually found; what is new; what is exciting about findings
- Decide how much to share, what to leave out to entice reader follow-up

Interpreting/Discussing Findings

- Synthesize/analyze
- May be more subjective; reflect passion/enthusiasm for work
- Share your opinion regarding meaning/value of findings
- Mention major results restrictions/limitations (Koopman, 1997)

Suggesting Implications for Practice/Future Research

- Answer readers' "So what?" question
- Suggest potential research/program impact on practice, theory development, future research
- Recommend areas for more research

➤ FIVE Cs OF ABSTRACT CONSTRUCTION (Ickes, 2010)

- Clarify goal/objectives
- Compare idea with conference theme/subthemes
- Compose abstract to be:
    - Readable
    - Well-organized
    - Jargon-free, except keywords
    - Concise
    - Cohesive with smooth transitions
    - Complete: covers all relevant aspects of project
- Comply with rules, for example, length/word count, content/sections, order, keywords
- Confirm/review all process-related details
    - Submission process/requirements
    - Process and evaluation criteria
    - Deadline!

▶ COMMON PITFALLS

- Poorly prepared/written abstract = "nonstarter"; facilitates rejection
- Vague/diffuse abstract misses intended audience/attracts "wrong" audience
- Needs "strength" to survive multilevel review process by various readers

▶ FINAL THOUGHTS

- Abstracts are readers' first impression of your work
- Basis for assessment of full work
- Highlight work's value, newness, excitement
- Revise, then double-check that final abstract content "matches"/corresponds to full work
- After hard work on manuscript/proposal, persist: write powerful, winning abstract
- Hard work on abstracts pays off

REFERENCES

American Psychological Association. (2009). Publication manual of the American Psychological Association (6th ed.). Washington, DC: Author.

Conboy-Ellis, K. A. (2007). How to write an abstract. American Academy of Allergy Asthma and Immunology. Retrieved from http://www.aaaai.org/members/allied_health/articlesofinterest/conboy_ellis.pdf

Ickes, M. J. (2010). How to write an abstract. Retrieved from http://www.sophe.org/Sophe/PDF/How%20to%20Write%20an%20Abstract.pdf

Jordan, C., & Zanna, M. P. (2000). Appendix: How to read a journal article in social psychology. In C. Stangor (Ed.), Stereotypes and prejudice: Essential readings (pp. 457-466). Philadelphia, PA: Psychology Press.

Koopman, P. (1997). How to write an abstract. Carnegie Mellon University. Retrieved from http://www.ece.cmu.edu/~koopman/essays/abstract.html

Lopez, E., Litchenstein, R., Lewis, A., Banaszak-Holl, J., Lewis, C., Johnson, P., & Baum, N. M. (2007). Drawing from Freirian empowerment methods to develop and use innovative learning maps: Increasing enrollment of uninsured children on Detroit's Eastside. Health Promotion Practice, 8, 181-191. doi:10.1177/1524839906286617

University of Mississippi Writing Center. Writing the abstract. Retrieved from http://www.olemiss.edu/depts/writing_center/grabstract.html