

Writing an abstract for your PhD

Rebecca Priestley

Writing a citation for graduation

Guy Randall

What is an abstract?

- “a standalone statement that enables readers to obtain an overview of your whole work”
 - Student Learning Support Service
- “a summary of the whole work, with particular emphasis on specific findings or recommendations”
 - Student Learning Support Service

What is an abstract?

- “a self-contained, short, and powerful statement that describes a larger work”
 - The Writing Centre, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
- “staunch writing that conveys maximum meaning through minimum words”
 - Dr Jens Hansen, Woodville Park Research Retreat

Why do we need an abstract?

- Your abstract will generally be the only information found in Internet bibliographies and published in directories of PhD research
- Your abstract should be an accurate representation of your thesis:
 - to let other researchers decide if they want to read the thesis
 - to make your thesis easy to find on search databases
 - to make sure indexers correctly reference your thesis

What should an abstract do?

- Briefly convey all the essential information in your thesis
- Present the objective, methods, results and conclusions
- Contain key terms associated with your thesis
- Be succinct and non-repetitive
- Be no more than 500 words long
- **THE ABSTRACT COMES FIRST IN YOUR THESIS, BUT YOU WRITE IT LAST**

What should I put into my abstract?

- Different disciplines will require different sorts of abstracts and you should work closely with your supervisor to fine tune your abstract, but broadly, this is what you want to tell us:
- Tell us what your thesis is about
the problem, the main argument, your aim, hypothesis, research question, objectives

What should I put into my abstract?

- Tell us what you did
your methods, the data you collected, how you analysed the data, any special techniques you used
- Tell us what you found
summarise your results and key findings
- Tell us how or why that is important
your conclusions, any key discussion points, new questions raised or directions for future research

What sort of language should I use?

- Try to start with a strong statement that sums up your key findings
- Use keywords and phrases that allow for easy searching
- Use words only, no pictures or tables
- Don't use any unnecessary words: if you can do without them, cut them out

Four steps to writing an abstract

- One way to do this is presented in the *Writing an Abstract* publication by Student Learning Support Service

Step 1

- Begin with a draft of your whole thesis
- Highlight the objectives and conclusions from your Introduction and Conclusion chapters
- Underline keywords from your Methods section
- Highlight results and findings from the Discussion section, or from chapter Conclusions

Step 2

- Group the above information into a single paragraph
- Condense any definitions or explanations
- Delete repeated words and phrases
- Cut out any background information

Step 3

- Rephrase so that the abstract begins with your overall conclusions rather than with an introduction to the topic in general

Step 4

- Revise once more to ensure your abstract contains only essential information on the fewest possible words and cut out the obvious, such as ~~“The paper examines ...”~~ or ~~“The first chapter provides a description of ...”~~.

Your turn!

Look at your draft abstract:

- Have you told us what it's about, what you did, what you found and why it's important? If not, what is missing?
- Have you used appropriate language and good keywords?

Writing the graduation citation

- There are two citations at graduation:
 - written citation in the graduation programme
 - citation read out by the Vice-Chancellor
- Best thing is you don't have to start from scratch – you can use your abstract

Citations – short and sweet

- Main thing is they're short and sweet
- Written citation – under 100 words
- Spoken citation – around 30 words, one sentence that summarises your research

Some examples

Jonathan Crook

Antarctic sea ice expands each year to cover an area that is larger than the United States which impacts hugely upon global climate, ocean currents and sea life.

Jonathan Crook studied how sea ice grows near Antarctic glaciers, especially the puzzling changes in crystal structure found there. His research uses mathematics to explain how randomly oriented ice crystals swirling in ocean currents can suddenly stick to sea ice, changing its structure and helping it to grow faster. This has given researchers a better understanding of an important growth mechanism.

Spoken citation

Jonathan Crook's research uses mathematics to model the growth and composition of sea ice in Antarctica, and has shed light on why randomly oriented crystals suddenly appear in, and form an important part of, the sea ice structure.

Written citation

Aliitasi Tavila

Globalisation and modernisation have influenced Pacific people's traditional food preparation practices where they adopt western styles over their own traditions, which impacts negatively on their health. Aliitasi Su'a Tavila found that fa'a-Samoa (Samoa culture) in itself is not a barrier to promoting healthy eating when special occasions are held in the Samoan community, but it is the way that the culture is practised that needs to be addressed. In addition, the debate around the issue of being an insider and outsider researcher in the research context was explored.

Spoken citation

Aliitasi Tavila's research addresses the issue of globalisation's influence on Pacific people's traditional practices of food preparation where they adopt western styles over their own traditions, impacting negatively on their health.

Written citation

Michael O'Leary

Michael O'Leary's research explores the reasons why so few women writers in Aotearoa New Zealand appear in the literary scene from the end of World War Two up to the feminist-movement in the 1960s and 1970s. The findings showed most struggled to be published and that only later, if at all, were many of these writers recognised. The findings clarify issues of gender inequality within New Zealand society as mirrored in New Zealand literature of the time. It expands and illuminates existing ideas and understanding of the issues.

Spoken citation

Michael O'Leary's research explores and clarifies issues of gender inequality within New Zealand society as mirrored in New Zealand literature from 1945 to 1970.

Citations – dos and don'ts

Do

- Keep your citation to 100 words or below – ideally between 85-100 words
- Use simple terms and concepts easily understood by the general public
- Give practical examples of how your research findings may be used
- Show how your research has added to existing knowledge

Citations – dos and don'ts

Don't

- Use complex language or scientific terms
- List how you went about your research— unless you have developed a new research technique that in turn contributes to future research in your PhD field

Something your Grandma would understand...

- Target audience is not specialist – it's family, friends, people studying other stuff
- Only use words they'll understand
- Show your draft citation to a friend, family member, your hairdresser...

Let's have a go!

Questions?