

## Writing Structured Abstracts for Conference Submissions

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If you are new to academic conferences and see that a call for proposals requests the use of a structured abstract format, you may be tempted to use journal article abstracts as a model for your own writing. However, conference abstracts serve a different purpose than those for scholarly journal articles. A journal article abstract serves to summarize the contents of the full manuscript in order to convince readers to read the full article. Meanwhile, conference abstracts need to stand alone as a brief representation of your work. A conference abstract first aims to convince conference planners to select your work for inclusion. Second, an accepted conference abstract also tells attendees what to expect from your paper or poster if they attend your session. Third, an accepted abstract also may be used by judges when considering conference research awards. And finally, the conference proceedings may be used by future researchers compiling systematic reviews. All these purposes require a slightly different framing than the abstract you might write as the summary of a full manuscript. When designing a conference abstract, you have a few brief sentences to argue that your research project is valuable and worth the time of these conference attendees. This article briefly highlights key considerations for each section of a structured abstract for a conference research submission. For more detailed information about structured abstracts, see "The structured abstract: an essential tool for researchers" [1].

**OBJECTIVES/HYPOTHESIS/RESEARCH QUESTION(S):** For research, this section is best summarized as a question. If you already have the results, this may require taking a step back to a time before you knew the answer to the question. For example, the statement "To show that a live demonstration improves student assignment scores compared to handouts alone" can be rewritten as a question "Does providing students with a live demonstration in addition to a pdf handout improve assignment scores compared to handouts alone?" If you cannot explain the purpose of your project with a question or hypothesis, you likely are not writing a research abstract. Consider submitting a program description (or alternative) instead. Use this section to argue that your question is worth considering, and that the answers to this question will be of interest to attendees of the conference. That may require different framing depending on the topic of the conference.

**METHODS:** Explain what you did (or are planning to do) and why. You want to make sure to explain how the thing you are counting will answer your question. In the case of the research question example, we need to compare assignment scores. But which groups are we comparing? Two different years of the same course, two class sections in the same year, more classes, or two assignments in the same course? Each one of those introduces its own bias that will need to be considered. Demonstrate to the conference planners and attendees that you will be able to answer your question with this methodology.

**RESULTS:** Numbers, numbers, numbers! This is where all of your numbers belong. Not just the comparison of, for example, an average assignment score of 9/10 points in one group vs. 6/10 points in the other. But also, how many students were in the class that you were evaluating? Was this in one class or 20 classes? If you used another methodology, what was the response rate to your survey? Present the data in a way that makes it clear how it answers your research question. Include as much information as possible within word counts limits. Often, when submitting a conference abstract, a project is in progress and may not yet have results. In that case, note that "If accepted, these data will be shared at the annual meeting." Be aware that in these cases, it is likely that further scrutiny will be paid to the Objectives and Methods sections, heightening the importance of conveying the purpose of your research and why your proposed methods are appropriate for answering your research question(s).

**DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS:** Tell the audience what your results mean in the broader context. Did the data answer your question? Did the data give you the answer you expected? If not, consider reasons why not. What other questions do you have now? What should be repeated? Why will this be of interest to the conference audience? Since you will have a limited word count, use the abstract to focus on the conclusions that will be most interesting to the conference audience. Again, you may submit before having results to frame conclusions around. In this case, say something like "Discussion of results will be shared following completion of data collection. Results will be interpreted based on comparisons to existing literature on the topic."

**KEY POINTS:**

- Conference abstracts are a tool to advocate for your project's inclusion in a conference.
- The abstract is a stand-alone document, since there is no manuscript to read for more information.
- Include as much information as possible within the word count limits, especially your data.

- An abstract without a question/hypothesis and data might not be a research abstract.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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