

How to write a good abstract for a conference paper

Guide for Attendees of International Conference of Translational Medicine

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An abstract is a brief summary of the paper you want to present at an academic conference, but actually it's much more than that. It does not only say something about the paper you are proposing, but also a lot about yourself. An experienced evaluator giving his time for the tedious process of paper selection will attentively study your proposal, but will at the same time read quite a few things between the lines: the enthusiasm you have for your topic, the professionalism with which the proposal has been drafted, the respect you show for the event you are applying for.

1. Respect

Respect for the event is expressed by

- a) verifying if your topic really fits the call for papers;
- b) limiting yourself to the word count that is indicated by the organisers;
- c) following the instructions on how to format the proposal;
- d) including all the additional information required (such as basic personal data, keywords, exact level of study, etc.);
- e) writing a text in correct English syntax and spelling;
- f) keeping to the deadline.

2. Focus

A good abstract provides an idea of why the original research this paper is based upon provides an added value to the conference and the ongoing dialogue in the field. It is obviously not easy to squeeze the research of an entire PhD thesis into a few lines. You will need to focus on one specific angle, answering four straightforward questions:

- a) What is the problem you address?
- b) What method(s) do you use to research this problem?
- c) What data have you been able to produce or process?
- d) What (intermediary) findings will you be able to discuss?

In answering these four questions in a succinct manner, the usual 200 to 300 words of an abstract are quickly used up.

And take your time! A good abstract is not written in just a few minutes. Even experienced researchers prefer to go over it several times.

3. What to drop

Keeping to the word limit is easier if you resist the temptation to start with an introduction. Just enter into the subject – your problem or research question itself is introduction enough. There is no need either to include references to authors or works that underpin your research. The evaluators will trust you have not engaged into a PhD or managed it to your third year without having appropriated the theoretical and conceptual basics.

4. Where to look for inspiration

If you are still unsure, go for help. If you are part of a pre-established panel, ask you panel convenor what he/she thinks about your abstract. (Obviously, it helps if this is not done at the very last minute...). Ask your PhD supervisor whether he/she can give some advice. Or browse the numerous abstracts that are online from previous conferences. Look for abstracts of young researchers, who are still at very early stages of their career. Ask yourself: what made the evaluator gain a positive impression of a given proposal?

5. Unpublished data in your conference abstract

Usually, when you present your work in a conference, it shows the work in progress, i.e., one part of the work that is preliminary & usually unpublished.

Your abstract is like a business card or ‘elevator pitch’. You want to be remembered by the people to whom you offer it. Favourably, if possible.