

# Writing an abstract 10 points to consider

**Georgina Gethin**, PhD, MSc Clinical Research, RGN, PG Dip Wound Healing, FFNM RCSI  
 Professor of Nursing, School of Nursing and Midwifery, NUI Galway, Galway, Ireland  
 Director, Alliance for Research and Innovation in Wounds, NUI Galway, Galway, Ireland  
 Funded Investigator, CURAM (SFI Centre for Research and Innovation in Medical Devices), NUI Galway, Galway, Ireland  
 Adjunct Associate Professor, School of Nursing and Midwifery, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia  
 Editor, Journal of Wound Management. Official journal of the European Wound Management Association  
 Correspondance: Georgina.gethin@nuigalway.ie



## Introduction

The abstract is often written last, but is read first by any reviewer or conference scientific committee; it appears in database searches for systematic reviews or other forms of evidence synthesis; and, put simply, is a window into the full story of what you have done. Unless it is presented properly, people will not read it. After months, and in some cases years, of endeavour, whether it is research or practice development, the abstract deserves your attention to make it stand out, to make people stop and read it and to give credit to the work that has been undertaken.

The following ten points are based on years of screen-

ing abstracts for conference submissions and as a reviewer for scientific journals. It is a guide and, hopefully, will assist you in the abstract-writing process.

### 1. Why are you doing it?

When submitting to a conference, you have to consider the return on your investment – why are you submitting, and therefore why are you writing this abstract? If you are at the point of submission, perhaps the ‘why’ does not matter, but it does make you focus and target your audience. There is no right answer here, but you should be able to answer it.

Possible reasons include:

- To develop a track record of publications and presentations
- To develop your reputation and profile
- To enhance the reputation and profile of your organisation
- To reveal job opportunities
- To justify funding to attend conferences
- To enhance networking opportunities
- For dissemination of results and innovations
- Because you were told to!
- Check when you can expect a response – this may have implications for booking flights for a conference.
- Check if there is a discount for accepted abstracts for a conference, or for a journal if you are a member of a society.
- Check the word limit and format.
- If it is a conference, check if you have a choice between delivering an oral or poster presentation.
- If the journal is open access, check the charges and whether or not you are entitled to any discount or waiver depending on the funding model for your work, your status as a student or perhaps your country of origin.

### 2. Choosing the right meeting or journal

It is the old cliché – know your audience. Think carefully about where you wish to present or publish your work. Making sure your work is aligned with the theme of the meeting or the ethos of the journal will increase the possibility of acceptance. Be ambitious in your journal and meeting choices, as you can only publish your paper once, but also be realistic in where you are likely to be accepted. Time wasted in targeting the wrong journal means further time delays in having your work published. In relation to the conference you choose, consider the location and registration costs. There is little point in being accepted to a conference in the South of France if you do not have the funding to attend. Try to avoid submitting a conference abstract to multiple meetings, as it can diminish the credibility of your work

### 3. Read the instructions

If you have ever tried to assemble flat pack furniture or put together a doll's house on Christmas Eve, then you know the golden rule – read the instructions carefully. There is no better way to ensure rejection than by not following the instructions. Journals and conferences vary significantly in word count, the use of headings, the type of font, spacing and even alignment, so do not ignore these instructions. Remember, you are trying to make it easy for your work to be accepted, so ignoring the rules will not help you.

- Check the date and time of submission (remember time zones, so account for that).
- Choose your category. Conferences and many journals have different categories under which you can submit.
- In the case of journals, there are strict limits for the word counts for various types of papers, so make sure to consider this well in advance of your submission.
- Use no more than 2–3 abbreviations, and write these out in full the first time you use them.

### 4. Time

Allow enough time to develop your abstract and make sure the final version is approved by all authors. Ensure that the order of authors is agreed by all – remember that the order of authors of a conference abstract may be different to the order of authors of the final publication. It is critical that you gain full approval from co-authors before submission, as failure to do so at this stage can mean disputes later within the group.

### 5. Writing

So, we get to the nub of the issue. In order to write well, you need to read – so read previous submissions to the conference or journal to gain a sense of style. In the case of an abstract, words are valuable, so don't waste them and use the best ones. Think about what the key and most interesting point you want to convey is; what is the essence of what you have done? Is there one message that you want people to read?

- Be concise, avoid jargon and avoid empty phrases such as ‘studies show’. This is meaningless unless you can indicate which studies.
- Know your audience – who do you want to read this?
- Think of those for whom English is not their first language – this is particularly relevant for conference abstracts.

First, write out your abstract in full and ignore the word count. Then, through a process of critical reading and a little bit of skill, start to eliminate unnecessary words, phrases and sentences. Many writers have a tendency to include too much background with few words left to detail their results. Just 2–3 sentences for background should be sufficient.

### 6. Reporting

Use appropriate guidelines for the reporting of studies. Examples include: CONSORT, PRISMA, QUOROM, etc. This not only shows that you are familiar with these guidelines, but also that you can adhere to them. Ultimately, it enhances your abstract, making it more likely to be read.

### 7. Title – what’s in a name?

We have all fallen foul of having a boring and disastrous title for a really good piece of work only to find the paper is not cited well, as the title simply does not grab attention. There is also no need to be comical in the title – there are rare exceptions of such efforts working in academic literature. Remember, it may be the difference between someone turning the page to the next article or conference presentation or reading yours.

- No more than 10–12 words
- Should describe what was investigated and how
- Should be engaging
- Often it is the first and only thing that people look at
- Helps with citations and the communication of ideas
- Below this, list all authors and affiliations and a contact email

- Keywords usually follow the title

### 8. Content

Use standard headings while developing your abstract and then adjust these to the style of the journal or conference

*Introduction/background:* Describe the gap in the research that this study fills. Use 2–3 sentences maximum.

*Objectives/aim/hypothesis:* Be careful here, people often use the heading ‘objective’ and then state the aim of the study, rather than the objective. It is either one or both, but these terms are not interchangeable.

*Methods:* Include the design, the population, sampling and measurement tools.

*Results:* Present the most important, relevant result – usually the primary outcome.

*Conclusions:* Do not overstate, for example: ‘we believe our study will revolutionise the way we assess wounds’. What can you conclude from what you have done? The conclusion is not a summary, it is a conclusion.

*Implications/Recommendations:* Some conferences and journals require this; if not, leave it out, unless you have an important message. Be sure to consider how the results will impact practice, policy or subsequent research.

Check if a table or figure is allowed in addition to the word count. Do not submit to a conference with the text: ‘we will present the results at the conference’. This is the best way to be rejected. In some exceptional circumstances, scientific committees will allow this, but communication in advance is required.

### 9. The do’s and don’ts

Check your spelling! Do not submit anything until this is done. Some conferences will not correct your submission, so once published, it is always out there. Poor spelling may also be a cause for rejection.

Use the word count. Submissions of fewer than 100 words are unlikely to be accepted, unless they are truly ground-breaking.

Do not salami slice. Multiple submissions for one piece of work is not a good practice and is easily spotted by reviewers.

Conflicts of interest – These must always be declared. If in doubt, declare it anyway.

Do not use trade names, it is best to avoid these. Finally, the statements in the abstract should match those in the paper.

#### **10. Phone a friend**

If you really want your work to be read and seen by others, then find a critical friend. Ask someone to read your abstract before you submit it; after all, you want the world to read it once it is published. If English is not your first language, and indeed even

it is, then ask someone to read for spelling, grammar, meaning and understanding – they can save you embarrassment later when you spot a mistake.

Good luck with your submission! Remember take your time, be proud of your work and above all, read the instructions and follow them.

For submissions to the Journal of Wound Management. Official journal of the European Wound Management Association, please see the author guidelines <https://ewma.org/what-we-do/journal/author-guidelines>

A presentation of this article is available on the EWMA Knowledge Centre <https://ewma.conference2web.com/>

