

Writing an Abstract

An abstract is a brief overview of your paper informing the reader what the paper will talk about; your main argument; why your research topic is relevant; your approach to the research conducted (methodology and data utilized to substantiate your claim); and the limitations of your research. This is because the purpose of an abstract is to communicate to the readers the scope of your study so they can decide whether the information provided is relevant to them or not. Therefore, even though an abstract comes at the beginning of any paper, it is always written once the rest of the paper is completed.

Note: An abstract can be written for your own paper or for another study. Either way, the basic components of an abstract will not change.

Types of Abstracts:

Descriptive Abstract	Informative Abstract	Critical Abstract
Includes the purpose, thesis statement, and methodology of the paper only	Functions as an outline as it mentions the results/conclusion & future research avenues in addition to the purpose, argument, and methodology present in the paper	Describes the main findings, presents an evaluation of the paper, and the research methods employed
Does not discuss the findings or the results	Discusses the main arguments, evidence, results and recommendations from the author	Often compares it with other studies/researches conducted on the topic
Often includes keywords found in the paper	Does not include an evaluation and critique of the paper	Discusses the cogency and completeness of the study

Is typically very short: 100 – 150 words	Usually a paragraph to an entire page	Is generally 400 – 500 words
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Choosing an Abstract Type:

As far as choosing the right kind of abstract goes, if no specific requirements are given by your instructor, you can choose the one that best suits your paper.

As mentioned in the table above, a descriptive abstract is usually written for shorter papers and gives a summary of the purpose, methods, and the scope of your research paper, while leaving out the findings of the paper.

An informative abstract, though frequently used in sciences, is not uncommon in other fields. It covers the results of your research paper in addition to all the elements mentioned in the descriptive abstract, and is therefore longer in length than the former kind.

The critical abstract, is not commonly written, unless otherwise specified as it requires the author to evaluate and critique their research, by often comparing it to other relevant studies conducted on the topic.

Constituent Elements of an Abstract:

Regardless of the type of abstract you are writing, it is crucial that you have a clear understanding of the following key terms:

Research Problem: Every research paper has a key claim or question that it attempts to challenge or answer, and abstracts usually begin by establishing the research problem, in clear and concise language.

Rationale: The rationale of a research problem informs the readers about why the research issue is important to the field and why they should be interested in reading the paper itself.

Implications: When talking about the implications of one's research, the author explains how the research paper will fill the gaps in the existing knowledge on the topic. He/She may also want to add what changes could be expected, (in the Informative and Critical abstracts, more specific findings/results should be discussed in the same way).

Approach/Methodology: This part of an abstract talks about the research methods (specifically the theoretical frameworks, sources, data collection methods etc.) used to investigate the research problem.

Writing an Abstract: Sample

The point of writing an abstract is being able to demonstrate how well you have researched and thought about the assignment because, if you recall, an abstract includes your main argument; why your research topic is relevant; and, your approach to the research being conducted (methodology and data utilized to substantiate your claim). These are the fundamental elements of an abstract, and ultimately your paper. Therefore, even if you have only a general sense of all of these components, you have already done half the work.

Please keep in mind that while your abstract includes your main argument, you cannot be certain of your argument until you have finished writing your paper. This is because your argument must come from your data, and not the other way around. However, this does not mean that you cannot have a well-formulated argument at the very initial stage – you can. The point is that you must change your argument if the analysis of the data suggests otherwise. Still, unless you are an experienced writer (graduate level experience) it will be difficult for you to formulate a concise and well thought-out argument at such an early stage in your assignment. Even more so if you have not read many secondary resources pertaining to your research.

Now, one way of writing an abstract is by listing all of its parts (research problem, rationale, implications, and approach/methodology) separately and then bring them all together (you can also just start off by writing an abstract, by way of adopting a free writing approach, and then revise it to ensure that it has all the components that are required for the type of abstract you are writing). We would suggest that you adopt the former one, as it will also help you in developing an outline of your paper.

For demonstrative purposes, we shall be using the abstract written by Sara Ahmed for her paper, “Embodying diversity: problems and paradoxes for Black feminists” (2009).

First, we will look at the abstract in its entirety, thereafter we shall list each of the components of an abstract (research problem, rationale, implications, and approach/methodology) separately to explain how they all go together to make a coherent abstract.

Sample Abstract

This paper examines some of the problems and paradoxes of embodying diversity for organisations. With reference to a research project based on interviews with diversity practitioners, as well as personal experience of working within universities as a Black feminist, this paper explores how diversity becomes a commitment that requires that those who embody that diversity express happiness and gratitude. Our very arrival into organisations is used as evidence that the whiteness of which we speak no longer exists. Most importantly to embody diversity can mean to be under pressure not to speak about racism. The very talk about racism is seen as introducing bad feelings into organisations. Drawing on the work of bell hooks and Audre Lorde, the paper argues that we need to reclaim the figure of the angry Black feminist, and that we need to refuse the injunction to be happy objects for the organisation, which means being willing to cause trouble and being prepared to stay as sore as our points.

Keywords: racism, diversity, emotion, Black feminism

(Ahmed 2009, 41)

Research problem	<p>Broad research problem: What are some of the problems and paradoxes of embodying diversity for organisations.</p> <p>Specific research problem: To explore how diversity becomes a commitment that requires that those who embody that diversity express happiness and gratitude.</p>
Rationale	<p>The arrival of People of Colour into organisations is used as evidence that the whiteness of which we speak no longer exists. Most importantly to embody diversity can mean to be under pressure not to speak about racism. The very talk about racism is seen as introducing bad feeling into organisations.</p>
Implications/(Argument for Informative and Critical abstracts)	<p>The paper argues that we need to reclaim the figure of the angry Black feminist, and that we need to refuse the injunction to be happy objects for the organisation, which means being willing to cause trouble and being prepared to stay as sore as our points.</p>
Approach/methodology	<p>With reference to a research project based on interviews with diversity practitioners, as well as personal experience of working within universities as a Black feminist, this paper draws upon the on the work of bell hooks and Audre Lorde.</p>

First recognize that there is no one-fit-all model. Even with the four components mentioned above, which are to be found in any abstract, there are many ways of writing it. As such, please ensure that your abstract provides a brief overview of your paper and communicates the scope of your study, at the least.

Now, let us move on to an analysis of each component of the abstract written by Sara Ahmed.

		Analysis of Each Component
Research problem	<p>Broad research problem: What are some of the problems and paradoxes of embodying diversity for organisations?</p> <p>Specific research problem: To explore how diversity becomes a commitment that requires that those who embody that diversity express happiness and gratitude.</p>	<p>Notice how Ahmed goes from situating her research in a broad context to a more specific one. You need not always do this as just stating your specific area of research can suffice; however, it is crucial that you provide the context for your research.</p>
Rationale	<p>The arrival of People of Colour into organisations is used as evidence that the whiteness we speak of no longer exists. ... to embody diversity can mean to be under pressure not to speak about racism. The talk about racism is seen as introducing bad feeling into organisations.</p>	<p>Here she explains the wider importance of her research and who the stakeholders are. Moreover, she argues for the significance of her rationale, “to embody diversity can mean to be under pressure not to speak about racism.”</p>
Implications/ (Argument for Informative and Critical abstracts)	<p>The paper argues that we need to reclaim the figure of the angry Black feminist, and that we need to refuse the injunction to be happy objects for the organisation, which means being willing to cause trouble and being prepared to stay as sore as our points.</p>	<p>As Ahmed has finished writing her paper (and it is quite clearly published), an informative abstract is more suitable for her. Hence, she talks about the implications/consequences of, “reclaim[ing] the figure of the angry Black feminist”.</p>
Approach/methodology	<p>With reference to a research project based on interviews with diversity practitioners, as well as personal experience of working in universities as a Black feminist, this paper draws upon the work of bell hooks and Audre Lorde.</p>	<p>Here we see how Ahmed has succinctly (within 40 words) informed us of her theoretical roots (Black feminists), her primary data sources (herself and other diversity practitioners), and one key methodological approach for this paper (interviews).</p>

The Dos and Don'ts of Writing an Abstract:

Most readers will only skim through your abstract hoping to understand the gist of your paper; therefore, being able to relay the main idea and purpose of your paper is essential for a well-written abstract. As such, keep in mind the following points while writing your abstract:

1. Emphasize the important areas of your paper using active voice and verbs, and use simple past tense as you are writing about a research that has been completed.
2. Avoid the use of "I" and "We" to maintain an objective and academic tone, cut down redundant adjectives, and try to use the same chronological structure as that of your research paper.
3. While you should use certain keywords within your abstract, it is crucial that you do not get carried away with the usage of technical terms as that will impede the readability of the text. An abstract that overuses jargon and technical terms fails to convey the sense that any original research has been undertaken as you are merely regurgitating the work other researchers have done. As such, ensure that your abstract mentions the research problem and its implications in commonly relatable terms, without bunching too many technical terms together in the same sentence.
4. Steer clear of lengthy background information, heavy-handed referencing to other sources, illustrations, figures, and tables.

Bibliography:

Ahmed, Sara. 2009. "Embodying diversity: problems and paradoxes for Black feminists." *Race Ethnicity and Education* 12 (1): 41-52. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/13613320802650931>