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## Abstract, Summary, or Introduction? A 5-Question Method for Writing Abstracts

The instructions for submitting a paper to your professional organization require that you write a 200-word **abstract**. Your team's template for technical reports requires an **executive summary**. Or you would like to write an **introduction** to a paper or report. But what is the difference between an abstract, an executive summary, and an introduction? And how do you write each? Let's explore the answers to those questions, beginning with **the abstract**.

**A well-written abstract** is a succinct, cohesive stand-alone overview or preview of a formal paper or report that allows readers to quickly determine whether the paper/report's topic and scope are of interest and suit their purposes. The title and abstract differentiate the paper/report from all other papers/reports on the same topic. An abstract is usually one paragraph and contains neither illustrations nor footnotes.

The abstract may be published in a list of papers for a formal professional conference, on a web page to attract readers, or in a database to allow archiving and retrieval. The publishing or archiving organization will typically stipulate the length and style of their abstracts. Their writer's guide and website will provide

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examples. A common length is from 150 to 300 words. The style will be *informative* or *indicative*:

- An **informative abstract** is a summary of the paper/report's technical question/purpose, methodology, findings/results, conclusions, and recommendations—presented in the same order as in the paper/report.
- An **indicative abstract** is a definition of the paper/report's technical question/purpose and scope as well as a preview of the paper/report's structure. But an indicative abstract provides no answer to the technical question; that is, there are no findings/results, conclusion, or recommendations.

An abstract is published separately for indexing purposes and also appears at the beginning of the abstracted paper/report. It is stand-alone in the sense that all abbreviations used are spelled out and there are no cross-references to specific content, sections, or pages of the abstracted document. And the abstract is understandable by interested readers who have not yet read and may not read the paper/report. An abstract is typically followed by distinctive key words and phrases that readers will use to search a data base for the abstracted document.

### **The 5-Question Method for Writing Abstracts**

To jump-start writing your abstract, copy and use as writing prompts the following five questions for an *informative abstract* or the first three questions for an *indicative abstract*. Answer the questions with no more than two or three sentences, and then remove the questions.

1. Context/Motivation: What is the context for the issue? Why do the problem and results matter? In what way will your results improve or change the reader's work, the organization, or the world? TIP: Lift the motivation statement from your Introduction.

2. Problem/Purpose: Why was the study/research/work performed? What problem are you solving? What question are you answering? What is the scope of your work? TIP: Lift the purpose statement from your Introduction.

3. Approach/Methodology: How did you solve or make progress on the problem? Briefly describe your basic methodology, being

sure to list the key techniques used and to highlight any distinctive features of your approach. TIP: Lift your approach statement(s) from your Methods section.

4. Findings/Results: What did you learn? Anticipate and answer your readers' most important questions about the information. Summarize key findings such as quantitative results or trends. Highlight and explain any new or unusual results. Use only the high-level information; save the details for the discussion in the paper/report. TIP: Lift your findings/results statement(s) from your Results section.

5. Conclusions/Recommendations: What is the solution to the problem? What is the answer to the question? What are the implications of your answer—the basis for the recommendation? What is the significance of what you learned? What is the path forward? TIP: Lift your conclusions/recommendations statement(s) from your Conclusions/Recommendations section(s).

To illustrate this approach, let's use an **indicative abstract** (created for instructional purposes only) about the Ebola virus. To jump-start the writing process, we answer the first three questions:

1. Context/Motivation: What is the context for the issue? Why do the problem and results matter? In what way will your results improve or change the reader's work, the organization, or the world? TIP: Lift the motivation statement from your Introduction.

**For example:** *The Ebola virus, an aggressive pathogen that causes a highly lethal hemorrhagic fever syndrome in humans and other primates, has claimed more than 1,500 lives in the current west-African outbreak. Officials estimate that at least 10 percent of reported deaths have been healthcare workers trying to combat the disease.*

2. Problem/Purpose: Why was the study/research/work performed? What problem are you solving? What question are you answering? What is the scope of your work? TIP: Lift the purpose statement from your Introduction.

**For example:** *No FDA-approved vaccine or therapeutics are available, and healthcare facilities require the latest information about this often fatal contagious disease.*

3. Approach/Methodology: How did you solve or make progress on the problem? Briefly describe your basic methodology, being sure to list the key techniques used and to highlight any distinctive features of your approach. TIP: Lift your approach statement(s) from your Methods section.

**For example:** *Medical and virological literature were reviewed to assemble lessons learned from previous epidemics as well as key facts about Ebola including its pathogenicity and virulence in humans, the progress of vaccine development, and the World Health Organization's Ebola-specific infection prevention and control recommendations for healthcare workers in a healthcare environment. This information can be used to update a healthcare facility's infectious disease guidelines and procedures. Facilities should continue to update their guidelines and procedures as new information becomes available.*

Then we remove the three questions, and “voilà!”—an indicative abstract. All we need to add are our key words.

**INDICATIVE ABSTRACT:** *The Ebola virus, an aggressive pathogen that causes a highly lethal hemorrhagic fever syndrome in humans and other primates, has claimed more than 1,500 lives in the current west-African outbreak. Officials estimate that at least 10 percent of reported deaths have been healthcare workers trying to combat the disease. No FDA-approved vaccine or therapeutics are available, and healthcare facilities require the latest information about this often fatal contagious disease. Medical and virological literature were reviewed to assemble lessons learned from previous epidemics as well as key facts about Ebola including its pathogenicity and virulence in humans, the progress of vaccine development, and the World Health Organization's Ebola-specific infection prevention and control recommendations for healthcare workers in a healthcare environment. This information can be used to update a healthcare facility's infectious disease guidelines and procedures. Facilities should continue to update their guidelines and procedures as new information becomes available. [147 words]*

With a working definition of the term **abstract** combined with the **5-Question Method for Writing Abstracts**, you are well equipped to write an abstract. In our next blog, we'll explore **executive summaries**.

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