

What is an Abstract?

I. Abstract:

What's required for an abstract?¹

It should be between 250-350 words.

What should an abstract do?

- It is a short piece of writing that describes research/a paper/a project or podcast script that you are GOING to write. This is in contrast to the abstract of the research/dissertation/article that you have already written.

An abstract is highly formulaic. Let's break it down. It needs to show the following:

1. Big picture problem or topic that is debated in your field.

(Might include the names of scholars: "The question of xxx has been widely debated in xxx field, with scholars such as xxx and xx arguing xxx").

2. ** A gap in the published scholarship on this topic, or at least something that needs further attention.

(However, these works/articles/arguments/perspectives have not adequately addressed the issue of xxxx.")

3. How your project or analysis fills or begins to address the gap

(My paper addresses the issue of xx with special attention to xxx).

4. The specific material that you examine in your paper—this might include the subject matter you'll examine and what kinds of sources you use to investigate it.

(Specifically, in my project, I will be looking at xxx and xxx, in order to show xxxx. I will discuss xx and xx, and juxtapose them against xx and xx, in order to reveal the previously misunderstood connections between xx and xx").

5. Your argument (hopefully original).

(I argue that....)

6. A strong concluding sentence

(This project, by closely examining xxxx, sheds new light on the neglected/little recognized/debated/rarely acknowledged issue of xxxx.")

Each of these six elements is most likely contained in a single sentence.

How to write an abstract:

¹ With thanks to this concise guide on abstracts from <http://theprofessorisin.com/2011/07/12/how-today-how-to-write-a-paper-abstract/>

Start by writing out your own version of the sentences above, succinctly if you can, but without stressing about your word limit too much.

Once that is done, edit to your word count.

One of the key points of the paper abstract is that it is very short, and every word must count. No fluff, no filler, no blather.

Remove wordy phrases like, “it can be argued that,” “It is commonly acknowledged that,” “I wish to propose the argument that”—these are all empty filler. Work in short, declarative sentences.

If you are wondering—how do I make an **argument** when I haven’t written or researched the thing yet? Well—that’s the challenge. Come up with a plausible, reasonable argument for the purposes of the abstract. If you end up writing something slightly different in the actual paper itself, that’s ok!

For your reference, here is one abstract that demonstrate how the principles above work. It has parts that are missing or weak (as noted). Editing or inclusion of these elements would have strengthened the abstract:

1. Access to marriage or marriage-like institutions, and the recognition of lesbian and gay familial lives more generally, has become central to lesbian and gay equality struggles in recent years [Sentence 1–Big problem]. [Sentence 2–Gap in literature MISSING here]. This paper considers what utopian fiction has to offer by way of alternatives to this drive for ever more regulation of the family [Sentence 3–Her project fills the gap]. Through analysis of Marge Piercy’s classic feminist novel, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, and Thomas Bezucha’s award-winning gay film, *Big Eden*, alternative ways of conceptualizing the place of law in lesbian and gay familial lives are considered and explored [Sentence 4–Her specific material in the paper]. Looking to utopia as a method for rethinking the place of law in society offers rich new perspectives on the issue of lesbian and gay familial recognition [Sentence 5–Her argument, weak]. I argue that utopian fiction signals that the time is now ripe for a radical reevaluation of how we recognize and regulate not only same-sex relationships but all family forms [Sentence 6– a strong conclusion.].

[Rosie Harding, “Imagining a Different World: Reconsidering the Regulation of Family Lives.” *Law and Literature* 22, No. 3 (Fall 2010) (pp. 440-462)]
