

Abstract Guidelines

Abstract: Due Friday, April 23, 2021, 5:00 p.m.

What's required for this abstract?¹

It should be between 250-350 words.

What should an abstract do?

- It is a short abstract that describes research/a paper/a talk 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.

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

How to write an 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 the paper 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 very normal and 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)]

Research paper resources: See me if you have concerns or questions about *how* to structure a research paper.

Some basics on getting organized:

One approach to outlines and
introductions

Outlines

- An outline can be useful, but also a nuisance (grumbles grumbles grumbles we remember having to do this in past classes, or may remember “writing” the outline after actually writing the paper, etc).
- Sometimes outlining is more useful than at other times; knowing how to do it is a good idea, though...
- **Why make an outline?** Helps you know where you are going, what comes next, what material belongs where. Helps you make difficult decisions about what should be included, what should be left out, and how the material should be ordered.
- Personal note: I never used to like outlining **at all**, but now: it massively helps me figure out how long certain sections need to be—if I know the entire paper is 8 to 10 pages, I make myself notes about length in the outline and it keeps certain sections from getting out of wack in the overall proportion. Also, it panics me way less to know that I need to write 1/2 a page on a particular subject and then a page on another than thinking “Okay, time to write that 10 page paper!!”

Outlines

Generally there are two types of outlines: topic-based and sentence-based

- **Topic-based outline:** nouns or noun-phrases, not statements.

I. Introduction: computers in the classroom
II. Uses of computers
 A. Labs
 B. Classroom Instruction
III. Revision Studies
 A. Study A
 B. Study B
IV. Conclusion

- **Point-based or sentence-based outline:** A series of sentences or points (your main reasons).

I. Introduction—The value of classroom computers is uncertain.
II. Different uses of computers have different effects
 A. All uses increase flexibility
 B. Networked Computer labs allow student interaction
 C. Classroom instruction does not enhance learning etc.
III. Studies show that the benefits of computers on writing revision are limited
 A. Study A: writers become more wordy when using computers
 B. Study B: writers need hard copy to revise effectively
IV. Conclusion: It's too soon to tell how much word processors improve learning
 A. At the moment, too few reliable empirical studies
 B. At the moment, too little history, too many programs in transition

Outlining the Body of the Paper...

- **Main arguments:** list first main arguments to support your thesis and then subtopics to be included under each of the main points. Probably going all the way to paragraph by paragraph level is helpful at this stage.
- **Order is essential here:** what comes first? Which deserves the final strong position?
- **Methodology:** maybe note to yourself in your outline when you will quote from secondary sources, which sections include a specific example, which points depend on analysis, etc.

Adapted from Wingell, *Writing About Music: An Introductory Guide*, 49.

Introductions: How to write one....

A working idea for an introduction: expect to revise and even discard it, but it helps to have this sketchily dealt with early on anyway....

- **The three elements of an introduction:** (this isn't true for all introductions, but is quite common)
- ***A contextualizing background:*** this establishes common ground, a shared understanding between reader and writer. Some stable context of a common ground, some apparently unproblematic account of research, a statement of the community's consensus on a familiar topic. The writer then disrupts it with a problem.
- ***A statement of the problem:*** This really has two parts. Some *condition* of incomplete knowledge or understanding and then the *consequences* of not fully knowing or understanding.
- ***A response to the problem:*** Once you've disrupted your readers' stable context with a problem, they will expect you to resolve it, either by explicitly stating the gist of your solution or by implicitly promising them that you will do so later on. You can either state the gist of your solution right away, or you can promise a solution in the conclusion.

Adapted from Booth et al, *The Craft of Research*, 222-240

Introductions: How to write one....

Two admittedly weird introductions as examples of the elements from the previous slide!!

#1

Why can't a machine be more like a man? In almost every episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, the android Data wonders what makes a person a person. In the original *Star Trek*, similar questions were raised by the half-Vulcan Mr. Spock, whose status as a person was called into question by his machinelike logic and lack of emotion. In fact, Data and Spock are only recent examples of fictional narrative depictions of "quasi-persons" whose characters explore the nature and boundaries of humanity. The same question has been raised by and about other fictional pop culture creatures ranging from Frankenstein to Terminator II. An interesting question is how these fictional depictions—characterized as male—differ from machinelike Als characterized as women. As cultural interpreters, do these fictional depictions of humanity versus machines tacitly reinforce destructive stereotypes about what it is about a person that we think of as human or not? How is gender implicated in these depictions? Ultimately, I argue that these fictional depictions both reflect and shape our understandings of the boundaries between human and non-human, finding that our model of the "human" seems to be largely defined by Western criteria, and specifically by rather limited Western ideas about gender.

#2

Major John Andre, a British spy captured behind American military lines in civilian clothes in 1780, was hanged for his crimes. Though Andre was considered a patriot, he nonetheless suffered the punishment mandated by military law. Our traditions and societal norms have changed dramatically since 1780, yet intriguingly the punishment for spying has not. It is the only offense for which death is mandated. Recently, though, the Supreme Court has rejected mandatory death sentences in civilian cases, creating an ambiguity in their application to military cases. If Court decisions apply to the military, then Congress may have to revise the Universal Code of Military Justice. Through an analysis of several case studies, this article concludes that to be the case—Congress will indeed need to revise the military justice code.

Opening Context

Problem

Response

Adapted from Booth et al, *The Craft of Research*, 222-240

Introductions: How to write one....

How to start off an introduction?

- **These are kind of clichés, therefore not the best idea to do any of these:**

- the dictionary definition of a word (Webster's defines blank as such and such)
- starting really grandly and generically (For centuries, philosophers have wrestled with the concept of time...)
- just repeating the language/prompt of an assignment verbatim

- **What's better as a means of starting?**

- Open with a striking quotation
- Open with a Striking Fact
- Open with a Relevant Anecdote

- **Avoid extremes:** two common extremes are:

- the introduction that is way **too short** (two sentences or so and then just plunges into the paper)
- the introduction that is **way too long** (advice is usually that the introduction should be no more than 1/10 of the overall paper)

Adapted from Booth et al, *The Craft of Research*, 222-240