

# Writing an effective and successful conference abstract

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This paper aims to provide guidance on developing a strategy for writing a competitive and high quality abstract to increase the likelihood of it being accepted at a targeted conference. Well-presented abstracts play a crucial role in stimulating intellectual curiosity, and in 'branding' the relevance of new ideas and concepts to an audience succinctly and concisely. How the information is conveyed is a skilled activity that demands focused thinking and clarity in the use of language. To enhance appreciation of the core principles, this paper will be structured around exploring what is meant by a conference abstract, obtaining relevant information prior to writing, and developing a communication style that is clear, concise, informative and accessible leading to acceptance.

**Terms:** Conference abstracts; Writing a conference abstract; abstract preparation

## Introduction

Writing a conference abstract, either based on a practice development, service improvement or the outcomes of a literature based review or a study, is increasingly an important skill for a range of healthcare professionals (Albarran 2007). Yet there is growing concern that the readability of scientific abstracts is declining because of wider use of technical jargon, convoluted phraseology, inattention to details and lack of clarity (Elle 2017, Haigh 2006). Writing plainly, clearly and concisely increases the potential for your abstract being accepted at the targeted conference. A well written and interesting abstract will equally maximise the reach beyond practice to other interested groups including policy-makers, academics and the public.

Condensing the content of a large piece of work into a short abstract involves meticulous background preparation including having clarity about the aim, the intended audience, communication style and key messages to be imparted. While the focus of this paper is aimed at writing a conference abstract for an oral presentation, poster, symposium or workshop, many of the concepts apply to also writing the abstract in a paper for publication. Kara (2015) however, emphasises that with a paper for publication, reviewers may also identify areas for improvement within the abstract and invite authors to make the necessary changes and resubmit. This does not happen with a conference abstract, so getting this opportunity right is vital.

- What is the aim of an abstract?

The purpose of a conference abstract is to distil the salient ideas of a larger, maybe complex, project into a concise and précised summary. An abstract operates as 'window dressing' or 'an appetiser' (Albarran 2007) for what the presentation will expand upon, and, as Draper (2012) suggests it serves to provide you with an opportunity to make an impression and stand out from the crowd. As the competition to present at conferences has increased, selection of the best abstracts will be according to the quality, rigour and uniqueness of the contribution. Demonstrating that presentation of the work outlined in your abstract will add value to the conference is critical.

Typically, the scientific conference committee will appoint a panel of experts to assess the submitted abstracts and determine the extent to which each addresses the aims and objectives of the event, as well as for the aims, rigour in methodological reporting and evidence of novelty to the discipline. If your abstract is written in plain English, makes a distinctive contribution and satisfies the relevant criteria, your work will be accepted; this potentially means further exposure if subsequently published as part of conference proceedings within the supplement to a society's journal or on the organisers' webpages.

Another discerning audience are the delegates. Your abstract needs to inspire them as, based on the content (usually published in the material given to delegates in paper or electronic form), they will decide whether or not attend your presentation at conference. To persuade delegates on the merits of your work, abstract content needs to connect with them in a meaningful way, achieving this involves presenting the information in a readable, informative and detailed manner and by showing direct application of the data to the world of practice. Albarran (2007) additionally advises that at conference events, media professionals may be in attendance scanning the abstracts for potential newsworthy stories and this can mean exposure in mainstream news, in print or online. Additionally, journal editors may also attend such events, scouting for innovative and original work; the abstract handbook provides an excellent first source of information which may lead to an invitation to submit to a particular journal.

Abstracts can vary in their format and understanding the specific requirements of the conference organisers is vital to success. A 'summary format abstract' does not have a specific structure, an aim and conclusion must be included. Nevertheless the abstract should provide a synopsis of the salient issues about the project sufficiently to stimulate interest and grab attention. Examples of a summary abstract sometimes appear in the *British Journal of Cardiac Nursing* (see Mercer and Flynn 2017, Alyasin 2017). A structured abstract, by contrast, will have prescribed headings which will be available on the organisers or journal web-pages/in the call for abstracts. It is more suitable for presenting empirical work. According to Hartley and Cabanac (2017) and Draper (2012) structured abstracts include more information, are more readable and possible to recall, presumably as the content is broken into discreet sections. Table 1 provides an example of the conventional headings for

a structured research abstract, it is also recommended to selectively embed key search terms within the content, where possible.

- Obtaining key information prior to writing the abstract

Conference organisers will provide guidelines on the formatting of an abstract (either as a summary layout or a structured presentation, as discussed above) - it is therefore wise to familiarise yourself with these and follow them. There are other key fact-finding activities you need to carry out prior to drafting the abstract:

- Conference themes

A call for papers may be the incentive and encouragement to motivate you to submit an abstract, particularly if the venue has other local attractions or areas of interest. Typically, the conference will have an overarching aim or ambition, together with number of key themes embracing mainstream developments and innovations in the field. It is important to understand these, check for clues in the documentation and consider how your proposed abstract can be fashioned to align according to the particular chosen theme (Kara 2015). Signalling a strong link to a theme is vital, as this will be part of the selection criteria. You should aim to convey this in the background section as well as the implications and conclusion. As part of the submission you will need to state which theme (or conference stream) your abstract addresses.

- Audience

Knowing who the conference is aimed at (whether cardiac and cardiothoracic nurses, nurse researchers, or those in another field) is important, as you must orientate the abstract accordingly. Delegates at a research conference will be principally interested in advances in methodology and in the application of methods, whereas for clinicians may be keen to learn about the implications for practice and improving the quality of patient care. If the conference has an 'international' agenda or is outside the United Kingdom, write the abstract using language and a style that is universally accessible (Draper 2012) and acceptable, avoiding terms such as a 'band 6' nurse and NHS Trust. Knowing

your audience will help you tailor the abstract to meet the conference delegates' needs and priorities.

- Submission deadline

The conference announcement will include details of deadlines for submission and these will be very strict. As uploading is normally through the conference website, you should aim to submit at least 36 hours ahead to avoid last minute technical problems that may occur close to the deadline.

- Abstract formatting

Table 2 provides an outline of the main features for formatting an abstract; download a copy of the guidance from the conference website. Be aware that prior to submitting, you may need to login and create an account. Some conferences will allow you to upload an electronic file of the abstract, whereas others will have dedicated form for information to be typed-in or pasted. Some conferences will ask for abstracts to be sent as email attachments, but formatting requirements will be stipulated.

- Word count

Most conferences will include a specific word count in their call for abstracts. If submission is electronic there may be an automatic cut-off once you have reached the maximum allowed number of words. If not, or if submitting another way, it is still important to adhere to the word count allowed.

- Mode of presentation

The submission guidelines/call for abstracts may ask you to specify if you are submitting for consideration for an oral presentation, a poster or other form of presentation specified by the organisers. Make sure this is clearly indicated.

- Developing a clear communication style

As indicated earlier, an abstract requires planning and dedicated thinking to meet the conference acceptance standards, so it is important to create a timetable of writing periods to enable drafting and editing activities resulting in a well-written and crafted output

(Draper 2012). Deciding early on the aim of the abstract and what the key take-away message will be encourage a more deliberate and focused approach to writing. As you will be constrained by the imposed word limit, be concise and succinct. Realise this by using accessible language, minimising repetition, employing short sentences, and writing in a style that is easy to follow. Writing in a future tense should be employed selectively, because reviewers making decisions will be unclear whether presentation will reflect the content (Kara 2015).

Draper (2012) suggests that abstract authors adopt a writing voice that is engaging and grabs attention rather than an informal chatty or a passive tone. As highlighted in table 1, reader engagement can be achieved by making the subject or the nature of the problem relevant so that it immediately resonates with the audience's practice or personal experiences. For example, outlining the nature of the problem briefly and its significance to practice will suffice to set the context and help justify the research question. Draper (2012) additionally suggests that a persuasive writing style will help convince the scientific panel that you can deliver a quality presentation. Inviting co-authors and critical friends to read the draft abstract can be beneficial in determining whether the content comes across as informative, logical, credible, confident and authoritative. Demonstrating skills of accurate reporting, the informed application of theoretical concepts, analytical development and strong evidence of a unique contribution to the field will leave a positive impression with the reviewers.

Undertaking reviewing and editing procedures are essential for quality assurance and are an important stage towards securing a likelihood of abstract acceptance (Albarran 2007). Reviewing and editing activities have the purpose of improving the quality and readability of the abstract, confirming that the content is consistent with the aims of the conference, and that there is evidence of scholarship, relevance to the target audience, and in showcasing a fresh perspective. The outcome of completing a comprehensive review is to reduce the chances of being rejected.

There are two main principles to apply prior to submission, including:

*Refinement* – This is the process of sharpening the accessibility and focus of the abstract. Be thorough and meticulously check every sentence, and edit for grammar, syntax, punctuation

and spelling. Attention to these micro-structure details as well as the extent you have woven in the conference themes can be critical to an acceptance decision. Additionally, consistency with your choice of terminology, culturally sensitive language, gender neutral terms and referencing, together with absence of jargon and unsubstantiated statements all help with refinements.

*Reducing* - This involves ensuring that the writing is precise and uncluttered. Proof-reading and removing any ambiguous terms or sentences, deleting any repetition and any 'interesting data' that may not be relevant to the aims of the abstract will sharpen the readability. If you are reporting the results of a project, be selective and appropriate in your choice of data and only include information that pertains to the study aims. If you are presenting numerical data, accuracy is essential, ensure that this has been checked and confirmed prior to submission. Remember that having your abstract accepted may mean that it is published as conference proceedings or on the organiser's webpages but, you will not be invited to approve it. So, performing a quality review cannot be underestimated.

## **Conclusion**

The submission of abstracts to healthcare and nursing conferences is growing and becoming more competitive, however there is variability in the standards of submission. To be successful, prospective authors must undertake fact-finding activities to ensure that when drafting the abstract they demonstrate adherence to guidelines and convincingly match the conference aims and specified themes/streams. In addition, being accepted to present will depend in the clarity of the aims and objectives, the relevance to the audience, the accessibility of the content and the novelty of the work. In summary, writing a high quality abstract requires background preparatory work, clarity of focus and writing in an informative, accessible, credible style that inspires and demonstrates clear relevance to the conference audience.



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