Crafting a Compelling Abstract for your Dissertation/Research Paper

1. What is an abstract?

Simply put, the abstract in a dissertation or thesis is a **short (but well-structured) summary** that outlines the most important points of your research (i.e., the key takeaways). The abstract is usually 1 paragraph or about 300-500 words long (about one page).

A quick note regarding terminology – strictly speaking, an **abstract** and an **executive summary** are two **different things** when it comes to academic publications. Typically, an abstract only states **what** the research will be about, but doesn't explore the **findings**, whereas an executive summary covers **both**. However, in the context of a dissertation or thesis, the abstract usually covers both, providing a summary of the full project.

In terms of content, a good dissertation abstract usually covers the following points:

- Background information about the research
- The **purpose** of the research (what's it about and why is that important)
- The **methodology** (how you carried out the research)
- The key research **findings** (what answers you found)
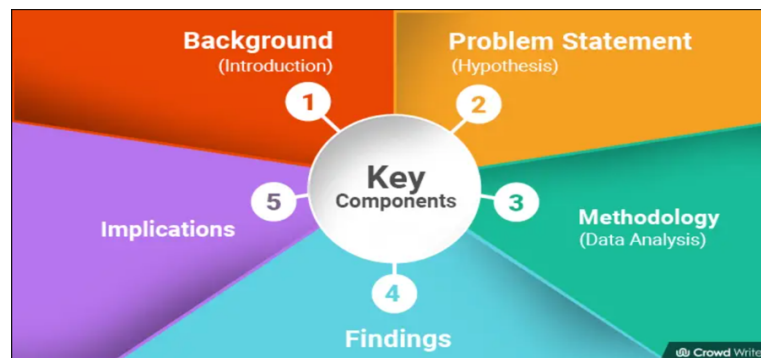- The **implications** of these findings (what these answers mean)

Figure 01: The 5 moves of an abstract.

2. What's the purpose of the abstract?

A dissertation abstract has two main functions:

The first purpose is to **inform potential readers** of the main idea of your research without them having to read your entire piece of work. Specifically, it needs to communicate **what your research is about** (what you were trying to find out) and **what your findings were**. When readers are deciding whether to read your dissertation or thesis, the abstract is the first part they'll consider.

The second purpose of the abstract is to **inform search engines and dissertation databases** as they index your dissertation or thesis. The keywords and phrases in your abstract (as well as your keyword list) will often be used by these search engines to categorize your work and make it accessible to users.

Simply put, your abstract is your shopfront display window – it's what passers-by (both human and digital) will look at before deciding to step inside.

3. Why is it so important?

The short answer – because most **people don't have time** to read your full dissertation or thesis! If you think back to when you undertook your literature review, you'll quickly realize just how important abstracts are! Researchers reviewing the literature on any given topic face a mountain of reading, so they need to optimize their approach. A good dissertation abstract **helps them decide** whether to continue to read it in its entirety. So, your abstract, as your shopfront display window, needs to **"sell" your research** to time-poor readers.

You might be thinking, "But I don't plan to publish my dissertation". Even so, **you still need to provide an impactful abstract** for your markers. Your ability to concisely summarize your work is one of the things they're assessing, so it's vital to invest time and effort into crafting an enticing shop window.

A good abstract also has an **added purpose for grad students**. As a freshly minted graduate, your dissertation or thesis is often your most significant professional accomplishment and highlights where your unique

expertise lies. Potential employers who want to know about this expertise are likely to only read the abstract (as opposed to reading your entire document) – so it needs to be good!

Think about it this way – if your thesis or dissertation were a book, then the abstract would be the blurb on the back cover. For better or worse, readers will **judge your book by its cover**.

4. How to write your abstract

Step 1: Describe the purpose and value of your research

Here, you need to concisely explain the **purpose** and **value** of your research. In other words, you need to explain **what** your research set out to discover and **why** that's important. When stating the purpose of research, you need to discuss the following:

- **What** were your <u>research aims and research questions</u>?
- **Why** were these aims and questions important?

It's essential to make this section extremely **clear, concise, and convincing**. As the opening section, this is where you'll "hook" your reader (marker) in and get them interested in your project. If you don't put in the effort here, you'll likely lose their interest.

Step 2: Briefly outline your study's methodology

In this part of your abstract, you need to very briefly explain how you went about answering your <u>research questions</u>. In other words, what research design and methodology did you adopt in your research? Some important questions to address here include:

- Did you take a <u>qualitative or quantitative approach</u>?
- Who/what did your **sample** consist of?
- How did you **collect** your data?
- How did you **analyze** your data?

Simply put, this section needs to address the "**how**" of your research. It doesn't need to be lengthy (this is just a summary, after all), but it should address the four questions above.

Step 3: Present your key findings

Next, you need to briefly highlight the **key findings**. Your research likely produced a wealth of data and findings, so there may be a temptation to ramble here. However, this section is just about the **key findings** – in other words, the answers to the original questions that you set out to address.

Again, **brevity** and **clarity** are important here. You need to concisely present the most important findings for your reader.

Step 4: Describe the implications of your research

Have you ever found yourself reading through a large report, struggling to figure out what all the findings mean in terms of the bigger picture? Well, that's the purpose of the implications section – to highlight the **"so what?"** of your research.

In this part of your abstract, you should address the following questions:

- What is the impact of your research findings on the **industry**/field investigated? In other words, what's the impact on the "real world"?
- What is the impact of your findings on the existing **body of knowledge**? For example, do they support the existing research?
- What might your findings mean for **future research** conducted on your topic?

If you include these four essential ingredients in your dissertation abstract, you'll be on headed in a good direction.

5. Practical tips for writing your abstract

When crafting the abstract for your dissertation or thesis, the most powerful technique you can use is to try and **put yourself in the shoes** of a potential reader. Assume the reader is **not an expert** in the field, but is

interested in the research area. In other words, write for the intelligent layman, not for the seasoned topic expert. Start by trying to **answer the question** "Why should I read this dissertation?"

Remember the WWHS.
Make sure you include the **what**, **why**, **how**, and **so what** of your research in your abstract:
- **What** you studied (who and where are included in this part)
- **Why** was the topic important
- **How** you designed your study (i.e., your research methodology)
- **So**, **what** were the big findings and implications of your research

Keep it simple.
Use terminology appropriate to your field of study, but don't overload your abstract with **big words** and **jargon** that cloud the meaning and make your writing difficult to digest. A good abstract should **appeal to all levels** of potential readers and should be a (relatively) easy read. Remember, you need to write for the intelligent layman.

Be specific.
When writing your abstract, clearly outline your **most important findings** and insights, and don't worry about "giving away" too much about your research – there's no need to withhold information. This is the one way your abstract is **not like a blurb** on the back of a book – the reader should be able to clearly understand the key takeaways of your thesis or dissertation after reading the abstract. Of course, if they then want more detail, they need to step into the dissertation and read more.

Figure 02: Things to consider when writing an abstract.