Abstracts

This penultimate section includes a brief look at RP abstracts. Note that a much more extensive treatment is available in *Abstracts and the Writing of Abstracts*, published by the University of Michigan Press (Swales and Feak 2009).

Unless you are in true humanities, your RP will probably require an abstract. Abstracts have been shown to be very important parts of an RP because of increasing competition to publish. Among certain important journals, manuscripts may be rejected after a reading of the abstract alone. While we need to emphasize that such rejections will be largely based on the perceived lack of research merit, it remains the case that a coherent abstract can only help a manuscript reach the next step of external review. We also know that if readers like your abstract, they may read your paper—or at least part of it. If they do not like it, they may not.

There are two main approaches to writing RP abstracts. One we will call the *results-driven* abstract because it concentrates on the research findings and what might be concluded from them. The other approach is to offer an *RP summary* abstract in which you provide one- or two-sentence synopses of each sections of the paper.

RP abstracts can be characterized as either *indicative* (describe what was done) or *informative* (include the main findings). In some very complex papers or those that are very theoretical (as in mathematics), it may be impossible to report findings and for those we would expect more informative abstracts. Some journals require structured (labeled with section titles), while others may not. However, we should note that structured abstracts have been spreading beyond the medical field (e.g., Hartley and Betts, 2009).

Structured abstracts have subheadings similar to those in a paper.

Background

Aim

Method

Results

Conclusion

Now here is the abstract for a paper we referred to in Task Nine of this unit.

TASK THIRTY-ONE

Read the abstract for the paper in Task Nine and answer the questions on page 386.

Does Self-Citation Pay?

Fowler, J. H., and Aksnes, D. W. (2007).
Scientometrics, 72, 427–437.

❶ Self-citations—those where authors cite their own works—account for a significant portion of all citations. ❷ These self-citations may result from the cumulative nature of individual research, the need for personal gratification, or the value of self-citation as a rhetorical and tactical tool in the struggle for visibility and scientific authority. ❸ In this article we examine the incentives that underlie citation by studying how authors' references to their own works affect the citations they receive from others. ❹ We report the results of a macro study of more than half a million citations to articles by Norwegian scientists that appeared in the Science Citation Index. ❺ We show that the more one cites oneself the more one is cited by other scholars. ❻ Controlling for numerous sources of variation in cumulative citation from others, our models suggest that each additional self-citation increases the number of citations from others by about one after one year, and by about three after five years. ❼ Moreover, there is no significant penalty for the most frequent self-citers—the effect of self-citation remains positive even for very high rates of self-citation. ❽ These results carry important policy implications for the use of citations to evaluate performance and distribute resources in science and they represent new information on the role and impact of self-citations in scientific communication.

1. **A first impression suggests that this is an RP-summary type of abstract. Can you show this by aligning the sentences with the IMRD structure?**
2. **What tense is used consistently throughout the abstract? Is this usage common and conventional in your field? If so, why? If not, why not?**
3. **The middle portion of the abstract uses first-person pronouns (*we* and *our*). Do you find these in the abstracts in your reference collection?**
4. **The authors of this abstract approximate their numbers. They refer in the abstract to "more than half a million citations," while the actual number examined was 692,455. What do you think of this?**
5. **Suppose somebody remarked, "Fowler and Aksnes are really quite promotional in this abstract." What evidence can you find for and against this observation?**
6. **In November 2011, Google Scholar indicated that this paper had been cited by 45 papers. This is a respectable total for this field. Why do think this is?**

It seems clear that tense usage in abstracts is fairly complicated. First, the conclusions are nearly always in the present. Second, RP summary abstracts often use the present or present perfect for their opening statements. Third, there appears to be considerable disciplinary and individual tense variation in sentences dealing with results.

Although descriptions of methods and results are often expressed through the past tense, it is not difficult to find exceptions to this pattern. Here is a short abstract from the "Rapid Communications" section of the journal *Physical Review A* (Vol. 48, R1–R4).

Nuclear-Structure Correction to the Lamb Shift

Pachucki, K., Leibfried, E., and Hänsch, T. W. (1993).

In this paper the second-order nuclear-structure correction to the energy of hydrogen-like systems is estimated and previous results are corrected. Both deuterium and hydrogen are considered. In the case of deuterium the correction is proportional to the nuclear polarizability and amounts to about -19 kHz for the 1S state. For hydrogen the resulting energy shift is about -60 Hz.

Our investigations suggest that the shift to the present tense is more likely to occur in the physical sciences, such as Physics, Chemistry, and Astrophysics, and less likely to occur in the social sciences. We also found that physicists and chemists were—perhaps surprisingly—more likely to adopt a personal stance. Indeed, we have found occasional abstracts, particularly in Astrophysics, which contain sequences of sentence openings like these:

We discuss . . . .

We compute . . . .

We conclude . . . .

It would therefore seem that choice of tense and person may again be partly a strategic matter in abstracts. Choosing the present tense option—if permitted—can produce an effect of liveliness and contemporary relevance. Choosing *we* can add pace, by making an abstract a little shorter. We have seen, of course, many of these features in the Fowler and Aksnes abstract.

TASK THIRTY-TWO

Draft an abstract for one of your research projects.

Acknowledgments

Acknowledgments have become an integral part of most RPs. Indeed, one well-known professor of our acquaintance reported to us that he always reads the acknowledgments of an RP first. When we asked him why, he replied, "Oh, the first thing I want to know is who has been talking to whom." While we do not think that this is standard reading behavior, it does show that acknowledgments can be more than a display of necessary politeness.