

Writing about Learning and Teaching in Higher Education

Creating and Contributing to Scholarly Conversations
across a Range of Genres

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“Writing a draft paper” (Reflection 24.1) was originally [published as a blog post](#) and is reproduced by permission of the author, Pat Thomson.

“What makes a good critical friend?” (Reflection 26.1) was originally [published as a blog post](#) and is reproduced by permission of the author, Rebecca J. Hogue.

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CHAPTER 10

PREPARING THE ABSTRACT

Planning and Clarifying the Potential Structure of Your Writing

[A] well-prepared abstract can be the most important single paragraph in an article. . . . Most people will have their first contact with an article by seeing just the abstract. (American Psychological Association 2010, 26)

The number one problem with abstracts is too much approach, not enough arrival. (Feldman 2004, 2)

It is worth rewriting the abstract as many times as may be needed to make sure that it really does summarize the main thrust of your writing and your findings. (Black et al. 1998, 113)

If the genre in which you are writing requires an abstract, take time to write an effective one. Abstracts are a key way of telling editors, reviewers, and potential readers about your work and are very common in academic journals and conference programs. Along with the title, the abstract will be read by many more people than the rest of the publication. Hence, your abstract should tell the story of your paper, including, as Daniel Feldman and Dolores Black and colleagues advise above, the main findings. But it can also play other vital roles in the writing process: as a planning device and as a final check on clarity.

The Function of Abstracts

Titles and abstracts are often the only parts of your paper that are freely available online, unless you publish in an open access journal or book. Moreover, they are the first thing that journal editors and reviewers read. “While busy journal editors may use the abstract to decide whether to send a paper for peer review or reject it outright, reviewers will form their first impression about your paper on reading it” (Rodrigues 2013). The function of the abstract is not only to attract readers, but also to deter those whose interests are not addressed in the paper (Day 2016). Extended abstracts are often used by conference organizers to select papers for presentation, although shorter abstracts may be all that they publish in the program. Video abstracts are also growing in importance for promoting publications (see chapter 29).

What Should Your Abstract Contain?

The style of journal abstracts varies both between and within disciplines, and even sometimes within the same journal. In the social sciences and humanities, abstracts are typically descriptive, while in the sciences, they are commonly structured to describe the background, methods, results, and conclusions (Cerejo 2013). “Writing [an abstract] in a structured format (with or without the headings) ensures that it is informative and complete” (Hartley 2008, 34). Ian McNay (2010), who for many years edited *Higher Education Abstracts*, and Royce Sadler (2006), who wrote the influential Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia’s Green Guide to publishing in scholarly journals, provide some useful advice on writing an abstract for an empirical learning and teaching article, which we synthesize here.

The abstract should:

- give a clear summary of the study, including a brief rationale and a concise description of the aim;
- summarize the methods used, including where and when the research took place and the number and type of sample or participants;
- state some specific results or findings; and

- discuss implications, recommendations, and limitations.

Depending on the length of the abstract, it may be challenging to include all their suggestions. The most important is to state clearly your main argument and what you are adding to the literature. They also advise avoiding using general statements such as “implications are considered” or “recommendations are listed.”

Rowena Murray recommends analyzing the structure and style of abstracts in your target journal as a way to plan your abstract. Looking at these examples will guide you in deciding:

- how to write “uncontentious opener” sentences;
- how to make the case for your work;
- how to link what is known/not known and your work;
- how to write about your methodology;
- how much detail to give on your results; and
- how to define your contribution—options and specific terms to use.

(Murray 2009, 59)

This set of recommendations should help you build your confidence in contributing to or creating a conversation hosted by that journal. Murray (2009, 132–33, 146–50) also provides a checklist of prompt questions and active verbs that you may consider using.

When Should You Write the Abstract?

There are differences of opinion about when to write the abstract. Some people advise leaving it until after you have finished writing your paper (Black et al. 1998; Cerejo 2013; Kate, Kumar, and Subair 2017), when it can be used to clarify whether you have made the argument you intended and prompt you to revise as needed. Others make a case for starting by writing the first draft of your abstract (Belcher 2009; Healey, Matthews, and Cook-Sather 2019; Sadler 2006; Thomson and Kamler 2013). What all agree, though, as indicated in the final quote at the beginning of this chapter, is that getting it right requires meticulous attention.

We also have different views on this topic. Alison usually leaves writing the abstract until at least the first draft of the paper is completed. Mick and Kelly used to do this as well until they came across the argument put forward by Pat Thomson and Barbara Kamler (2013) that there are considerable benefits to writing the abstract first and using it as a planning tool to clarify the argument, contribution, and structure of the paper and revisiting it several times during the writing process (see [chapter 24](#)). This is how we approached writing our *Teaching & Learning Inquiry* article (Healey, Matthews, and Cook-Sather 2019). As we discussed there, we also have different approaches to using abstract templates, frameworks, or structures: Alison finds them constraining, while Mick and Kelly believe they help focus their thinking before they write. Again, there is no one way to go about writing an abstract or deciding when to write it.

Structuring Your Abstract

A straightforward structure for an abstract is to identify the purpose, the argument, and the conclusion (Day 2016). Thomson and Kamler (2013, 52) suggest that you should think of your whole abstract “as an argument—a text that makes its key point explicit and highlights its contribution to the field.” They propose thinking of the abstract as a “tiny text” that has five “moves”: locate, focus, anchor, report, and argue (Table 10.1). A version of this table with the last two columns left empty is available in the online resources: “[A Planning Tool for Drafting Your Abstract](#).” You may find it helpful in drafting your abstract. A possible mnemonic to help remember the five moves “L F A R A” is “**L**earning **F**rom **A**cademic **R**esearch **A**rticles.”

While there are many templates and strategies for approaching the abstract, we find the Barbara Kamler and Pat Thomson (2013) model helpful because it positions the abstract as a planning tool while clearly indicating a framework to draft the abstract. New writers, like Joanne Bouma, have found this approach motivating (Reflection 10.1).

Table 10.1: Harnessing the abstract as a planning tool for a learning and teaching publication

| Moves | Purpose | Questions | Sentence starters |
|---------------|---|--|---|
| Locate | Describe the broader context within which your study contributes. | What is the broader topic of your study? | [xxx] is an issue of growing concern in universities. |
| Focus | State the issues, questions, or opportunities that your study explores. | How does your study explore this broad topic more specifically? | This study reports on research into ... [conducted where and with whom] to explore ... [linked to above topic]. |
| Anchor | Articulate an overview of your theoretical framework and research design. | What literature, models, or theories did you draw on? How did you gather data? | Our study was informed by ... [model/theory/work]. The views of [specific study participants] were captured through ... The results of our study were ... |
| Report | Present the key findings arising from your research. | What did you find overall from the analysis of your study? | |
| Argue | Make an argument with implications. | What are you arguing as a result of your research? What are the broader implications arising from your study? | We argue that ... Our findings imply that ... |

Source: Based on Healey, Matthews, and Cook-Sather (2019), modified from work of Pat Thomson and Barbara Kamler (2013)

Reflection 10.1**Using the abstract as a structuring device**

I attended a “writing for publication” workshop at the ISSOTL conference in Bergen, Norway, in 2018 organised by Mick, Kelly, and Alison. I have done a lot of inquiry into my own teaching and students’ learning experiences but have struggled to put it down on paper. I found the idea of the abstract structure so helpful because it took what I had written and forced me to think about how I had organized it and how I could organise it. Applying the abstract structure provided the flow that I was certainly lacking in the little bit of writing I had started and has motivated me to continue writing my paper. I found that I did not need to modify the “moves” at all.

Joanne Bouma is an associate professor (nursing) at Mount Royal University, Calgary, Canada.

We have reproduced the abstract from our *Teaching & Learning Inquiry* article below to illustrate how Pat Thomson and Barbara Kamler’s framework may be applied (Healey, Matthews, and Cook-Sather 2019, 43–44). We have inserted the names of the “moves” in the abstract for purposes of clarity, though they would not normally be included. In this case the anchor move was not relevant, as we did not have a research design.

[LOCATE] There are many general books and articles on publishing in peer-reviewed journals, but few specifically address issues around writing for journals focused on the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). One of the challenges of beginning to write about teaching and learning is that most scholars have become interested in exploring these issues in higher education alongside their disciplinary interests and have to grapple with a new literature and sometimes unfamiliar methods and genres, as well. Hence, for many, as they write up their

projects, they are simultaneously forging their identities as scholars of teaching and learning. [FOCUS] We discuss the process of producing four types of SoTL-focused writing for peer-reviewed journals: empirical research articles, conceptual articles, reflective essays, and opinion pieces. Our goal is to support both new and experienced scholars of teaching and teaching—faculty/academics, professional staff, and students—as they nurture and further develop their voices and their identities as scholars of teaching and learning and strive to contribute to the enhancement of learning and teaching in higher education. [REPORT] We pose three related sets of overarching questions for consideration when writing articles about teaching and learning for peer-reviewed journals and offer heuristic frameworks for publishing in the four specific writing genres listed above. We also discuss how to get started with writing, preparing to submit, and responding to reviewers, focusing on the importance of contributing to and creating scholarly conversations about teaching and learning. [ARGUE] Finally, using the metaphor of being in conversation, we argue that writing is a values-based process that contributes to the identity formation of scholars of teaching and learning and their sense of belonging within the SoTL discourse community.

This is, of course, only one way to structure your abstract, and some may find it too prescriptive and constraining, but a clear informative structure that presents the rationale, argument, and contribution of the paper is essential.

Over to You

The abstract, along with the title, is the most important part of your paper, but too many authors complete it in a rush prior to submitting their article. It is key for findability, particularly within proprietary databases that often default to only searching the title, author, abstract,

and keywords, not the full text of the article. The abstract should probably go through more drafts than any other section of your paper, and it can play a useful role in planning the structure of your article. We recommend that you think about the following questions:

- What are the key points from your writing that need to be included in your abstract?
- How are you going to structure your abstract?
- Will you start your writing by drafting the abstract or will you leave it until you have finished?
- When you go over your abstract from a searcher's perspective, can you identify what search terms your target audience might be using?