

## ABSTRACT HELP

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### Length limits

- Length limits are strict. Journal publishers often require even less, so brief summary-writing is an important skill.
- Publishers of abstract indices usually chop off abstracts in mid-sentence, if of greater length. It is these abstracts that are circulated internationally to publicize your work.
  - If you don't cut it, someone else will.
  - Editing your own abstract down to the allowable wordage gives you control of your portrait of your work.
- Master's thesis, project or extended essays
  - 150 words only.** Not one word more.
- Doctoral thesis: **350 words maximum.**

### Counting words

- MS Word or other conventional word processing program
  - Highlight the text, not including the heading.
  - In MSWord, go to Tools/Word Count.
  - In other programs, identify and find the word counting tool through the help menu.
- LaTeX: According to Prof. Toby Donaldson<sup>1</sup>, of the School of Computing Science, "there is no universal standard way to do word counts of LaTeX files. He does it in Unix/Linux like this, and adds, "it works on Fraser."

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tjd_fraser> detex abstract.tex > abstract.txt
tjd_fraser> wc -w abstract.txt
122 abstract.txt
```

### Drafting an abstract

- An abstract is not a summary, says Prof. Len Evenden<sup>2</sup>, of Geography:
  - "It's useful for students to realize that theses (and most individual research projects) can be indicated by a statement of what is intended ('statement of problem'), how it was approached and work conducted (methodology), and what happened (results/findings). 50 words a section... This, of course, works best with 'research' rather than creative or performance fields."
  - Reality: Abstracts are often distressingly plain, "flat-toned" text. It is easier to write this way if you treat your abstract as a "sound bite" rather than a sample of your best writing style.

<sup>1</sup> Email, 27 Jul 2005

<sup>2</sup> Email, 28 Jul 2005

## Cutting an abstract down

- Your first draft is more than the maximum. What next?
  - First check that only the basic necessities are included, and cut all others, including “further research”:
    - Problem statement
    - Work conducted
    - Results or findings
- Start cutting within sentences. Eliminate some of the following, each of which may be a small gain, but add up quickly.
  - Background information to your own work. In particular, references to other sources do not belong in abstracts at all.
  - Detailed descriptions or explanations, commonly found in subordinate phrases and subordinate clauses. These belong in the body of your text.
  - Attempts to argue for your perspective or conclusions. Abstracts are not intended to persuade. They merely describe.
  - “Post-modifying phrases” – prepositional phrases following a noun or adverbial phrases following a verb – can be shortened by changing the verb in the phrase to a “gerund” – an “ing” type verb, or can be eliminated by using an adjective or adverb.
    - “The dog that barked in the night” becomes “the dog barking in the night”
    - “odorous substances infused with pheromones produced by moths” becomes “odorous substances infused with moth pheromones” or “moth pheromone-infused odorants”
  - Adjectives can be eliminated by using a more accurate or colourful noun. Adverbs enhancing a verb can be replaced by a more effective or accurate verb.
    - “odorous substances” can become “odorants”
  - Transition words like “however” may not be needed if the following text is clearly a switch from the meaning of the preceding sentence.
    - First test results were positive. ~~However,~~ The second test were negative.
  - “And” can be cut:
    - if a co-ordinate conjunction between two separate thoughts, turn this into two sentences or replace “and” with a semi-colon: “Triangulated tests were conducted. ~~and~~ Results were compared with...”
    - If between two modifiers replace with a comma: (red~~and~~, shiny apples)
  - Minimize use of the word “the.” “The” is a strong pointer word, grammatically unnecessary if it does not mean “that, that, these, those specific [noun].” Do a search for the word “the”, and consider each one by asking:
    - Does this mean that there specific [whatever]” Yes? Keep it; No? cut it.

## Overall format and length on the page

- Abstracts are in plain text only.
  - No bullet paragraphs
  - No italics other than scientific names
  - No references
  - No single spacing.
  - May have first line indent if desired.
  - Justification permitted.
- A 150 word Master’s abstract will not be more than one page.
- A 350 word doctoral abstract may be slightly over one page, depending on the font. If you wish to limit it to one page, consider 1.5 line spacing and 11 pt font, but not smaller.