

What is an abstract?

In this context, abstracts are a brief overview or summary of an undergraduate research project. Essentially, one is quickly summarizing your research project and telling your readers what you would do when presenting on your research. The length of an abstract depends on where you're presenting your research. Some abstracts are 100 words; others are 700 words. **(UURAF and Mid-SURE abstracts are limited to 250 words.)** Because abstracts are used to tell your audience about your research and pique their interest in it, there are four important questions that they must answer:

- What is your research about?
- Why is your research important?
- How was your research done?
- What will you present on?

To address these questions, you first need to think about who your audience is, then think about what they need to know about your research.

Who is your audience?

Your abstract actually has a couple of audiences. Your first audience is your research mentor, who will likely review your abstract before you submit it. He or she might ask questions related to how well it represents the research project, how well you've articulated the main focus, and key points of your research.

Your second audience will typically be the organizers for the meeting or conference you are interested in attending. Most academic meetings have a program review committee comprised of experts to evaluate the potential of each abstract. Your abstract will be reviewed (along with all the other abstracts submitted) to determine whether or not your abstract is presentation-worthy—that is, whether it describes an interesting, promising presentation to include at the meeting.

Your third audience will usually be the attendees of the meeting or conference. Conferences usually create program books (either print versions or on-line) that list the presentations included in the meeting. These books usually include the titles and abstracts of every poster and oral presentation to be delivered at the meeting or conference. Attendees use the book to decide which presentations look interesting and which presentations they want to attend.

What does your audience need to know?

If your meeting or conference has a very specific audience—other researchers and professionals in your academic discipline—you can likely rely on technical language and specific jargon in your abstract. A discipline-specific audience will understand what you're talking about and what you're referring to. If your meeting or conference has a very general audience—for instance, UURAF, which attracts hundreds of student

presenters and audiences of people from all over campus—you will likely want to rely on more “lay” language and avoid using dense technical language and specific jargon in your abstract.

You might want to try adopting the approach a lot of journalists take: Think about a typical article in *Science* magazine, or in a similar publication. These authors don’t necessarily “dumb down” the material, but they try to engage their audience in a way most of their readers will understand without needing an extensive, specific background in an area. Along with understanding your terminology, your audience will need to know a few key things:

1. What your presentation is about? Your title is one way you can convey this information. Good abstracts include a descriptive, interesting title. The first few sentences of your abstract should also be specific in describing what your research focus is, and what your research is about.
2. Why is your research important? What problem or issue is your research addressing?
3. How are you doing your research? What methods are you using? What data-gathering are you engaged in? How are you doing your analysis?
4. What will the audience get to hear about or see in your presentation? There should be a “In this presentation, I will...” statement in your abstract.

How much detail should you include?

The list above may look long, but abstracts are typically very short documents: Sometimes an abstract writer is limited to 150 or 250 words. That means you have to be specific and focused. Analyzing a specific abstract is helpful in seeing how this can be done. The video above provides a helpful analysis of an abstract that shows how the authors hooked their audience with a good, descriptive title; included an overview of their presentation; and discussed the importance of the research.

How can you avoid abstract-writing pitfalls?

There are a few things you’ll definitely want to avoid when writing an abstract:

- **Abstract Writer Doesn’t Consider Their Audience.** If you’re presenting at a general meeting or conference, a pitfall would be to load your abstract or your presentation with specific abbreviations or heavy jargon. On the other hand, a different sort of pitfall is being too casual or conversational; an abstract is a formal piece of academic and professional writing.
- **Author Doesn’t Provide a Sense of the Presentation Itself.** Your abstract has to include a sense of what your presentation will include, address, or cover.
- **Abstract Doesn’t Address the Relevance of the Research.** A good abstract answers the “so what?” question. A good abstract informs readers as to why the research is compelling, interesting, and important.
- **Typos or Misspellings.** It’s important that you use the tools available to you as you prepare your abstract. Start with spell-check and grammar-check features, but

because word processing software won't catch everything, ask your research mentor or a graduate student to read your abstract carefully. You might also consider having a friend or colleague read over your abstract.

What are some other resources to consult?

- Your research mentor
- Past UURAF and Mid-SURE program books
- Past UURAF and Mid-SURE participants
- Resources from the Writing Workshop presentation.
- Search online for example abstracts written by people in your field. Looking at models is a great way to get started on your own abstract.