

CERCA Abstract Writing Guide

What is an abstract?

An abstract is a concise summary of your research project or paper in the form of a paragraph. An abstract may outline a project which has been completed or propose a new project to be started. Abstracts let readers know what your project is about, why your project is relevant, how your research was/will be conducted, and what your research might show.

What does an abstract do?

An abstract lets your reader know what to expect from your research poster, presentation, or performance. It also demonstrates your expertise and credibility.

What should an abstract include?

Successful abstracts, in *every discipline*, always achieve **five key goals**:

1. Title your research project.
 - Your title should be short and informative.
2. State your research question, aim, or scholarly goal.
 - What are the aims of your project?
 - This might be a yes/no question *or* an open-ended statement of what is being examined.
 - Your statement should be clear and concise -- typically 1-2 sentences.
3. Contextualize your project within existing knowledge or ideas.
 - Why is your project goal important?
 - How will your project produce new knowledge or perspectives?
 - What, within your field, motivated your project?
 - How is your project different from other projects?
 - What is the background and the research context of your creative work?
 - If your project presentation involves a performance with a lecture, how does your lecture provide a research context for your performance?
 - You may want to reference one or two key sources.
 - You should *explicitly* connect your contextualization to your research.
4. Describe the methods or approach you used or will use.
 - How, *specifically*, is your project conducted?
 - What, *specifically*, is your project examining?
5. Describe your main conclusions, outcomes, products, or recommendations.
 - Your conclusion will be what your project contributed to the discipline or what new knowledge your project created.
 - Explain the significance of your results or how your results might be generalized.
 - What your conclusions, outcomes, products, or recommendations hope to achieve or how they might impact your audience.
 - If the project isn't complete, state the kinds of results you expect.

We strongly encourage you to work with your faculty/staff mentor to develop your abstract. Your mentor will have experience writing abstracts and will share expectations for abstracts in your research area.

Sample Abstracts

A few diverse and effective abstracts are color coded below to help you understand how different departments, projects, and individuals approach the abstract process and address the five key elements of a successful abstract.

Art Abstract:

An Exploration of Social Spaces

Over the course of last summer I created a sculptural structure which I then installed in three consecutive highly active social spaces on campus. The spaces I chose for installation were designed (by their architects) to function as social epicenters around campus, encouraging characteristically frequent instances of chance encounters and unusual social circumstances to navigate. My design intention was to create a structure which encouraged contemplation of the social characteristics of these familiar environments. The sculptural work accomplishes this by implementing similar social design principles to those of the three larger spaces: controlled visibility, directed motion, seating availability, and spatial enclosure. By adjusting the parameters of these characteristics to be in almost direct opposition to those of the original space, similar principles serve to create a sharp juxtaposition of qualities between the interior of the structure and the exterior pre-existing space. By highlighting the otherwise unnoticed characteristics of the exterior space through juxtaposition, the piece was intended to inspire reflection upon the consciously designed environment surrounding us and intentionally influencing our behaviors.

The research question is split by the contextualization and outlines goals/objectives.

This contextualization is a bit nonstandard. But, it still explains how this project fits within other 'work'.

The methods section explains what research went into the project.

The author explains how this art project achieved its goals.

Humanities Abstracts:

Literacy and Identity in Women's Commonplace Books in 18th-19th Century America

The purpose of this project was to study the realm of women's writing and, specifically, how women undertook writing in commonplace books, or scrapbook type books, as their medium. Through examining this field, I hope to illuminate how women, who are generally silenced by patriarchal society, were able to assert their own literacy and identity through these mediums. This looks beyond more broadly examined female writers, such as literary figures, and helps to give voices to women who might otherwise have gone unnoticed. Through an examination of two "commonplace" type books and their contents, I seek to show how women were able to express an attainment of literacy as well as escape patriarchal censure and express their own identities as well, both as women and as individuals. Through examining these two books, I also highlight that what is considered a "commonplace book" is a fluid term,

This is the research question.

This contextualizes the research project and tells the reader why it is 'interesting'.

This is the method section. It tells the reader what was studied and how.

This is the conclusion section. Note that it includes both 'specific' conclusions and 'generalized' conclusions.

and that it can be used to understand broader means of how individuals and cultures collect their own ideas about their identity into collective spaces, similar to commonplace books.

Grotesque Laughter in Helen Zenna Smith's *Not So Quiet... Stepdaughters of War*

In considering theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's claim that the aesthetic of the "grotesque" is not just bizarre exaggeration but rather a medium that leads to human connection and regeneration, this presentation applies Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque to Helen Zenna Smith's powerful anti-war novel *Not So Quiet . . . Stepdaughters of War*. The novel was written in 1929, using women's wartime diaries as primary research material, as the female counterpart to *All Quiet on the Western Front*. It became an international bestseller (though it fell into obscurity until its recuperation by The Feminist Press in the 1980s). This essay focuses specifically on Bakhtin's bodily concept of the "gaping mouth" as it sheds light on the sardonic, corrosive laughter that frequently erupts from the mouths of the novel's young British women workers (ambulance drivers, nurses and cooks) who endure the horrific experiences of the Front Line during The Great War. The presenter argues that Smith employs this grotesque laughter to illustrate that a universal, communal, and transcendent anti-war experience is forged through grotesque individual despair.

This project applies a theory to the content of a novel.

The background and context for the project is described.

The author explains what is being focused on within the theory and the connection that it makes to the novel.

The author states what the analysis in the essay will explain to the reader.

STEM Abstract:

Simulating Space Debris from a Satellite Explosion

With the increased use of satellites in low Earth orbit (LEO) there has also been an increase in the amount of man-made orbital debris in LEO. Events like the explosion of the Breeze M rocket stage and the collision between Iridium-33 and Cosmos-2251 satellites create a great deal of debris which disperses after impact. These objects in high-speed orbit around the earth have great potential to damage functional satellites also in orbit. This is a significant threat to the existing satellite infrastructure and also to future missions beyond Earth. In this research project, a computer simulation of the breakup of a satellite was created. Many models exist to look at the total amount of debris in orbit, but a model of a single breakup allows us to predict the time the debris stays in orbit and how to remove the debris more effectively. This talk will explain the non-inertial reference frame, and the finite differencing algorithm within the simulation. Results of the simulation will be presented for a satellite breaking apart uniformly. These results tell us a great deal about the dangers of orbital debris, the unusual trajectory of objects in orbit, and possible solutions to the "space junk" problem.

This abstract is written for a lay audience, so the contextualization was designed to 'hook' readers. Not all 'technical' abstracts need to be written for a lay audience.

Note how the research question explains how this project is unique and new.

The author skips over a technical explanation in order to make the abstract more accessible.

The author explains his results in a non-technical way.

Social Sciences Abstract:

Persistent Sexual Abuse by Clergy and Techniques of Neutralization: A Content Analysis of Priest Files from the Milwaukee Archdiocese

The sexual abuse problem in the Catholic Church has received considerable attention by the media in recent years. Despite this, the academic literature on the topic is scant. Using Sykes' and Matza's theory, this study examines the techniques of neutralization used by accused priests in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee. Priests' personnel files, which were made publicly available by the Archbishop of Milwaukee in July 2013, were analyzed using a qualitative content analysis of all direct statements and correspondences from the accused. The findings indicate that many priests denied responsibility or injury in an effort to justify their persistent sexually abusive behaviors, but that no discernible patterns of technique use emerged. The need for continued research using recently released personnel files from other dioceses also is discussed.

The contextualization focuses on why the research is important, focusing on the lack of similar research.

The research question is an *examination* rather than a yes/no question.

The author explains what is being examined (*files*) and how (using *Matza's theory* with *content analysis*).

Note, the conclusion is that more research needs to be conducted in order to answer the question.

Health and Human Sciences Abstract:

Evidence-Based Practice in Public Health Agencies

Public Health professionals are required to continuously improve the quality of service given to the communities they serve. In order to achieve health and economic benefits, professionals need access to evidence-based research findings. The purpose of this project is to improve public health practice by having University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire students obtain and share evidence-based research on topics identified by public health staff. Undergraduate students will also learn the need for integrating research evidence into practice. The collaborative process involves an initial meeting with the public health staff, email contact to submit requests for evidence searches, and a student obtaining the information and sending the information found to the staff member. Early evaluation of this project through site visits and participant feedback shows that the collaboration has been beneficial to both public health agencies and students. The evaluation plan also includes obtaining feedback from staff and administrators through an email survey and descriptions of student involvement and participation in a Northwest Area Health Education Center board meeting. The project process and summary will be shared at environmental and public health state conferences. Project funded by Northwest Area Health Education Center.

Rather than sharing the results of "evidence-based research", this project 'asks' whether bringing "evidence-based research" to public health staff in this manner is an effective practice.

While this sounds like a project process or method, it is actually describing what is being researched.

Since the project is an evaluation and summary of another project, this is the approach used.

This projects' contribution to the field is an evaluation and summary of a method of research.

Tips and Notes:

1. Take some time to revise and refine your abstract. An effective abstract takes revision and consideration.
2. Work with your faculty mentor to develop your abstract. Your faculty mentor has lots of experience writing and reviewing abstracts and will share expectations for abstracts in your research area.
3. Share your abstract with a friend/roommate/neighbor/parent to get an opinion from someone who is not in your field.
4. Limit quotations or footnotes; abstracts rarely include these items.
5. Consult event guidelines (e.g., CERCA) about abstracts, for example, length, format, and audience.
6. Skim similar abstracts. Search for a schedule or abstract book from last year's event or a similar event (e.g., [CERCA Abstract Books](#)).
7. Make an appointment at the [Center for Writing Excellence](#) (CWE) to brainstorm, get feedback, or put the finishing touches on your abstract. The CWE can help during *any* stage of the writing process.

If you have questions, difficulties, or suggestions on how to improve this document, contact orsp@uwec.edu.

Updated 12/15/2023