



THE ABSTRACT

We consider “Urbanism” a multidisciplinary area of research and practice, gathering urban design, spatial planning, data analysis and modelling, urban studies and sustainable technology, among others. Each area of knowledge asks different (but complementary) questions anchored on different ontology and epistemology. Different questions demand different methods to answer them. Sometimes, the same question can be answered from different perspectives. The Methodology Sheets give an overview of methods used in Urbanism.

WHAT DOES THIS METHOD ‘DO’?

An abstract is not really a “method”, but a tool that allows you to communicate the results of your research. So, what is exactly an abstract, and what does it do? An abstract is a short piece of text that comes generally after the title and the author’s name, and summarises the main objectives, questions, methods and results of your research. Why the results? An academic text is not like a novel. You don’t keep the ending from the reader, in the hopes that they will read until the end. You actually want to **hook the reader** by making sure they understand how **RELEVANT** your research,

how sound the methodology, how clear and clever the research question and how interesting the results are. You want to “hook” the reader, but you also want to **save them time**. During your professional or academic life, you will read thousands of abstracts to determine the relevance of that particular research to your own interests. Of course, if the abstract is clear, and contains all the elements I have mentioned, you will be able to assess the quality and the relevance of the work much faster and hence you will save time! There is no rule of thumb about how long an abstract must

be. A good number of words is 300. The temptation is there to include everything, but you need to be brief. Anything between 150 and 350 words is acceptable. More than that, and you are already writing the main text. The abstract is generally also accompanied by keywords at the bottom. The keywords summarise the research even further and are useful to make online searches. As mentioned, abstracts should include an introduction, methods, results and discussion (IM-RaD), and including the research question helps a lot. Including citations depends on the type of abstract.

WHY DO WE NEED THIS METHOD?

As I mentioned, the abstract summarises not only the results of your research, but also the problem, the questions, the methods, the results and the discussion. It is a lot of stuff for 300 words, but it’s feasible. The main objective is to summarise your research endeavour, so the reader can make a quick evaluation of its relevance and soundness. But in this world of excessive information availability, the abstract is above all a toll for communication. There are millions of articles and reports available, so I should I read your work? As a researcher, I will go through several abstracts before I choose one or two papers that really interest me. The quality of the abstract is a very good indication of the quality of the whole research. If the abstract is badly written, chances are the following text or report is badly written as well. So, it is supremely important that you get your abstract right, and that you keep it simple, direct and informative. The abstract also speaks to the need to summarise your research, so it is quickly understood by a wide range of readers. In this sense, the abstract should use clear, simple language, and avoid obscure jargon and cryptic ideas. The world is going through an attention deficit crisis: it is hard to concentrate and focus with so much stimulation from our phones and TV sets. Your abstract, in combination with a good informative title and clear keywords, will help you communicate your results and stand out in the crowd.

IT’S A COMMUNICATION TOOL

LIMITATIONS

As I’ve explained, an academic text should not “hold back” the results from the reader, but there is a temptation to describe results in detail. After all, we want to convey the full complexity of our ideas. But the abstract should be really to the point, without being too dry or boring. Many of us have grown up with the idea that academic texts must be serious, dry, and frankly, boring. This is certainly one of the reasons why students think an academic career is not for them. But contemporary texts (and academic research) are much more engaging, interesting and fun to read than the reports of the 1980s. There is much more freedom to use text and image, and to use less “technical” language. (Of course, abstracts generally don’t include images, I am referring to academic texts in general). Emotional, exaggerated and excessively colloquial language should be avoided, but this is because it tends to make arguments weaker. A good argument is like a white obelisk gleaming under the sun: it stands by itself. Part of the “technical language” myth is the constant use of passive voice: “It is believed...”, “It has been said...”, “It is assumed...”. While passive voice is not grammatically incorrect, sometimes people make grammatical acrobatics to keep the sentence in passive voice, making it opaque and difficult to understand. Use direct active voice: “I believe...”, “I assert...”, “I assume...”. You can read more about passive voice at Brown, 2019 (see further reading).

USE DIRECT LANGUAGE!

HOW DO YOU DO IT?



The following text is adapted from McCombes, S. (2019). How to Write an Abstract | 4 Steps & Examples. At Scribbr. Available at <https://www.scribbr.com/dissertation/abstract/>

An abstract is a short summary of a longer work (such as a dissertation or research paper). The abstract concisely reports the aims and outcomes of your research so that readers know exactly what the paper is about.

Write the abstract at the very end, when you've completed the rest of the text. There are four things you need to include:

- Your research problem and objectives
- Your methods
- Your key results or arguments
- Your conclusion

An abstract is usually around 150–300 words, but there's often a strict word limit, so make sure to check the requirements of the university or journal.

Aims

Start by clearly defining the purpose of your research. What practical or theoretical problem does the research respond to, or what research question did you aim to answer? You can include some brief context on the social or academic relevance of your topic, but don't go into detailed background information.

After identifying the problem, state the objective of your research. Use verbs like investigate, test, analyse or evaluate to describe exactly what you set out to do.

- This study investigates the relationship between the port of Rotterdam and the natural landscape and wildlife around it.

Methods

Next, indicate the research methods that you used to answer your question. This part should be a straightforward description of what you did in one or two sentences. It is usually written in the past simple tense as it refers to completed actions.

- Structured interviews were conducted with 25 participants.

Don't evaluate validity or obstacles here—the goal is not

to give an account of the methodology's strengths and weaknesses, but to give the reader a quick insight into the overall approach and procedures you used.

Results

Next, summarize the main research results. This part of the abstract can be in the present or past simple tense.

- Our analysis shows a strong correlation between coffee consumption and productivity.

Depending on how long and complex your research is, you may not be able to include all results here. Try to highlight only the most important findings that will allow the reader to understand your conclusions.

Conclusion

Finally, state the main conclusions of your research: what is your answer to the problem or question? The reader should finish with a clear understanding of the central point that your research has proved or argued. Conclusions are usually written in the present simple tense.

- We conclude that the Port of Rotterdam significantly impacts wildlife in South Holland, but measures addressing the preservation of birds have been particularly effective in light of successive oil spills (*this is not true... It is just an example).

If there are important limitations to your research (for example, related to your sample size or methods), you should mention them briefly in the abstract. This allows the reader to accurately assess the credibility and generalizability of your research.

If your aim was to solve a practical problem, the conclusions might include recommendations for implementation. If relevant, you can briefly make suggestions for further research.

The abstract should tell a condensed version of the whole story, and it should only include information that can be found in the main text. Reread your abstract to make sure it gives a clear summary of your overall argument.

FURTHER READING



Brown, L. (2019). What's The Big Deal About The Passive Voice?, Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/laurambrown/2019/05/10/whats-the-big-deal-about-the-passive-voice/?sh=1370223048e7>

Cottrell, S. (2005) Critical Thinking Skills: Developing Effective Analysis and Argument. Palgrave.

Ellis, M. (2021). How to Write an Abstract for your Paper, Grammarly. https://www.grammarly.com/blog/write-an-abstract/?gclid=Cj0KCQiA9OiPBhCOARIsAl0y71CSVKSAk6P6lJNz_Ui7Etd0WV2Fq-4IzfNVw1A6hH9LkJ0QNWTCNjCYaAtalEALw_wcB&gclidsrc=aw.ds

McCombes, S. (2019). How to Write an Abstract | 4 Steps

& Examples. At Scribbr. Available at <https://www.scribbr.com/dissertation/abstract/>

University of Melbourne (no date). Writing an abstract: Understanding and developing abstracts. https://services.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/471274/Writing_an_Abstract_Update_051112.pdf