

Dealing with the word limit

One of the most difficult aspects of writing an abstract is the strict word limit. Here are some strategies for shortening an abstract, or even the body of an article, that is not meeting the word limit.

Step One: Tighten up your language

- A. Eliminate meaningless phrases
- B. Eliminate phrasal verbs & superlatives
- C. Consider cutting prepositions, especially "of"
- D. Consider changing noun phrases to verbs

What's wrong with this abstract?

X Example: This paper discusses research which was undertaken in the author's country. A theoretical framework is developed from a literature search and this is used by the authors as the basis of an analytical model. The researchers collected data within this framework and analysed it according to the precepts laid down by earlier researchers in the field. The data is used to demonstrate that our understanding can be significantly increased and this is discussed in the light of previous work. Conclusions are drawn and it is shown that these may be useful for practitioners.

*Hughes W. Refereed journal papers: Practice and process. 2005.
<http://www.personal.rdg.ac.uk/~kcshuwil/publish/Glasgow2005.pdf> . Retrieved November 2006.*

Obviously, the sample abstract above contains no details. Although this is an extreme case (actually it's a joke, not a real abstract), many writers do make the error of using some of these expressions, such as "The data is discussed in the light of previous work." If it is not possible to summarize a number of complex points briefly, do not write a vague sentence. Instead, choose the most important point, and explain it clearly. If you are dealing with the discussion/conclusion, you may wish to drop the sentence altogether.

Shortcuts to avoid

The list below includes several steps that will make your abstract shorter, but they are not acceptable. Do NOT . . .

- Cut articles (a/an/the): This is sometimes done in abstracting journals, but you shouldn't do it for your own articles.
- Cut "and" and other logical connectors critical to your meaning
- Create contractions (don't, can't, they'll, etc.)
- Create abbreviations that are not widely known (remember your international and graduate student readers)

by Jocelyn Graf Hanyang University Center for Teaching and Learning English Writing Lab
<http://ctl.hanyang.ac.kr/writing>