

## Editorial: Pages into sentences: writing better abstracts

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There are a number of similarities between writing a research article and preparing teaching materials.

The teaching materials must gain – and hold – the interest of the students. When you start to speak you have about 15 seconds to get the attention of your audience and convince them that what you have to say is worth listening to. Many teachers (perhaps most teachers) will have had the demoralising experience of losing their audience at the beginning of a lesson and then being unable to win them back. There are strong parallels for a research article.

The first thing that an editor does when he or she receive a new submission is to read the abstract. Depending on the editor's workload, that may be a very fast reading! It is therefore crucial that the abstract is well written to give a quick and accurate overview of the research and your report. It must convince the editor that this is an interesting article that merits a much closer look and that it is likely to be suitable for publication in the journal. Subsequently, it must pass the same critical examination by the reviewers.

Before you submit your article, “the title and abstract should focus and refine the author's thoughts and, as a result, should have a major impact on the writing process. [After] submission [they] convey massive amounts of information to reviewers and editors. They set the reviewers' and editors' expectations regarding the likelihood that the paper will contain important, relevant, rigorously collected, timely and clear information” (Eva, 2008).

Some journals, particularly in the life sciences, require a structured abstract which might typically include information under the following headings: purpose or objective, design/methodology/approach, findings, research limitations or implications, practical implications, social implications, originality and value. The specific headings vary from journal to journal. However, in social sciences such as education and psychology, it is more usual to let authors set out the abstract in the way that they think best. One way of achieving this is to use the three bullet point lists for practitioner notes described in an earlier editorial (see Rushby, 2017).

Marketing consultants advocate structuring their advertising copy by starting with:

- Exciting the reader's curiosity
- Providing some information and then
- Giving them the confidence that you know what you are talking about.

These guidelines can also be used for writing abstracts. What is it about this article that means the editor, the reviewer, and finally the researcher should read it? Why is it important? What pressing question does it answer? And then, what information does the reader need in order to decide that your research contains important, relevant, rigorously collected, timely and clear information.

It is often the case that the style of Russian abstracts is different from those by researchers in Europe and North America. In part this is due to the translation process. Google Translate is a very imprecise tool which can result in almost impenetrable text and should not be used for this purpose! In part it is the characteristic of the original Russian which gives very long sentences when translated into English. A good English abstract will have short simple sentences that can be read quickly by over-worked editors.

So, those authors who do not have English as their first language should spend time studying abstracts from articles published in a range of journals as examples that have convinced editors and reviewers. It is also helpful to ask native English speaking colleagues to comment on their abstracts (as well as the main text of their articles) to improve the clarity and readability of their work.

Your abstract is arguably the most important part of your submission!

### References

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