

Writing for professional publication.

Part 11: writing conference abstracts

John Fowler



Nursing and healthcare conferences range from one-day events organized by local trusts or education departments to three-day international conferences.

Invitations to submit abstracts of potential presentations appear regularly in the nursing press, usually about nine months before the conference takes place.

If you submit an abstract and it is accepted, you will be invited to present your paper at the conference and your abstract will be published in the conference handbook.

Writing your conference abstract

Guidelines are published for each conference on how your abstract should be presented. These will include the maximum number of words—normally about 500—and the style of heading to be used. These vary. Follow these criteria exactly as most national and international conferences will automatically reject any abstracts that do not meet them.

You may be considering presenting for the first time because you have just completed a dissertation at university; many presentations are based on dissertations, usually at master's level and beyond, but not all. Some relate to project work undertaken in a systematic way with clear outcomes and conclusions.

The title should capture the topic and give a sense of intrigue; very short and very long titles should be avoided. Review the following:

- Patient satisfaction in an orthopaedic unit: the untold story

Dr John Fowler published his first article as a staff nurse 30 years ago. Since then, he has written over 50 articles in various publications and edited seven textbooks. He has supported over 40 nurses in writing for publication.

Abstract

The previous articles in this series of writing for professional publication have focused on preparing the content and presentation of an article. Different types of articles have been examined, including case studies and project reports. In this article, John Fowler, an experienced nursing lecturer and author, discusses the writing of conference abstracts.

Keywords: Writing ■ Conference ■ Presentations ■ Abstracts

- Students' preregistration journeys: from carousel to roller coaster
- International perspectives on clinical supervision
- Breast cancer: the forgotten husband

Can you see how a title can convey a meaning while making people want to read the abstract and attend the presentation?

Following the title, the abstract should cover the following—but make sure you follow the guidelines exactly.

1. The theoretical and clinical background that gives context to your work
2. The methodology or the style of your study, e.g. "a survey of 300 staff nurses from one trust using purposive sampling to represent all wards"
3. Identify the way in which the data was or is to be analyzed
4. The objectives of the study
5. The interim findings, if any
6. Then, return to the bigger picture concerning how your findings might inform the theoretical and clinical areas identified in the first section.

All abstracts submitted will be reviewed by the organizing committee. Normally, each abstract is given to two committee members, who each make an independent assessment of its potential to be included in the conference. They will use some or all of these criteria:

- Does the abstract conform to the published guidelines for the conference?
- Is it written and presented at a level consistent with the conference's standing and reputation?
- Does the information appear valid and reliable?
- Does the abstract offer a new perspective on an established theory or practice?
- Does the abstract present new knowledge?
- Do other abstracts cover the same topic?

The reviewers then make a decision: 'accept', 'reject' or 'keep pending', depending on the standard of other abstracts.

Writing an abstract for submission to a conference is not easy. You have to present factual and often complex information in a way that conveys meaning and interest to the casual reader.

If your abstract is accepted, it will be published in the conference handbook. Delegates will use it when deciding whether to come and listen to your presentation.

If the abstract is accepted, you will not have the opportunity to change it before publication. Publication and presentation of an abstract is stressful but also extremely rewarding.

So, if you have a 'paper' in you, look around at the various conferences and consider submitting your abstract.

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