

Writing for professional publication.

Part 6: Writing the abstract

John Fowler



Abstract

How to get your work published is the essence of this series on writing for professional publication. The first four articles focused on the preparation required before you start writing a potential article, and the previous article examined the importance of creating interest in the reader's mind. In this sixth part of the series, John Fowler, an experienced nursing lecturer and author, discusses the importance of writing the abstract. It examines the content to include and also the importance of writing it in a way which encourages others to read the full article.

Keywords: Publication ■ Professional development ■ Career development

The previous article in this series on writing for professional publication focussed on the importance of gaining and maintaining the reader's interest, noting the important place that the abstract played in this process. The abstract is even more important when people search for articles online. Often what appears on your computer when you 'click on' an interesting looking title is the abstract rather than the full paper. The full article is usually only available if you have an Athens account, or are prepared to purchase the article independently.

Why is an abstract important?

- It communicates the essential components of the article, both within the paper copy of the journal and online
- The person reviewing the article for potential publication will form their initial opinion of the paper from the abstract
- If the abstract is informative and interesting more people will read your full article.

Dr John Fowler wrote his first article for publication as a staff nurse 30 years ago. Since then he has published over 50 articles in a variety of publications and edited seven nursing text books. He has supported over 40 nurses in writing for publication.

Although the abstract is the first part of the article that people read, it should be the last section that you write. Once you have finished writing the main body of your paper you should put it aside for a couple of days and then re-read it, making notes which identify the key points covered and any interesting conclusions. Then use these notes to complete your abstract.

Abstracts are generally a brief outline of the content of the article with a short summary of the main findings and conclusion. Most journals request three or four key words as well. These key words are important, as they will be the basis for electronic categorization and online searches. The *BJN* author guidelines (available at: <http://tiny.cc/euknp>) state that the abstract should be between 150–200 words; some journals allow a maximum of 250 words. Journals like the *BJN* prefer the abstract to read as a general narrative giving the reader an interesting summary of the paper. Some journals insist on specific headings being used, and these headings vary depending on the type of paper being presented. As discussed in the third article of this series, make sure you read the author guidelines for the specific journal you are submitting your paper to.

What you include in your abstract will depend a little on the type of paper you are writing. An abstract for a research study will include the type and size of the sample, data sources, research method, results and conclusions. A patient care study might include a summary of the incidence of the medical condition, its implications for the individual patient and the general population, treatment and specific nursing implications, conclusion and implication for future practice.

A typical abstract might include one short sentence on each of the following:

- Aims of the paper
- Data sources
- Review methods
- Dates of literature
- Results
- Conclusion
- Implications for future practice.

Once you have established which journal you intend submitting your article to, you need to make sure that you write your abstract to reflect the specific content, style and format identified in the journal guidelines. It is particularly important in an abstract that you avoid 'padding' with unnecessary content: make every word count.

The final requirement, and this is probably one of the most difficult aspects of writing the abstract, is to make it interesting: to add that hint of intrigue that makes the reader want to invest the time and energy in reading your full article. All this in 250 words! Read through the abstracts in this issue of the *BJN* and evaluate their effectiveness.

So far in this series we have examined the preparatory work required for successful publication. In the next issue you need to start putting pen to paper, or finger to the keyboard, as we examine the overall structure, presentation and style of your article. BJN

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