



Helpsheet

# ABSTRACTS

## Use this sheet to help you:

- write clear, concise, well-structured abstracts.

## 5 minute self test

Answer the questions below:

1. What's the difference between an abstract and an introduction?
2. How long should an abstract be?
3. Should all abstracts have the same structure?
4. Is it ok to include references in the abstract?
5. What verb tenses should be used in the abstract?

Read on to identify the answers

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FACULTY OF  
ECONOMICS &  
COMMERCE



## What is an abstract?

An abstract (sometimes called a synopsis, summary, or, in the professions, an executive summary) is a condensed summary of a formal report, research paper or thesis. An abstract is placed before the start of such a document and provides a concise, comprehensive overview of the entire document to follow.

The purpose of the abstract is to enable a busy student, academic or professional to get a broad picture of a paper. This may allow them to decide whether or not they need to continue reading.

The length of the abstract can depend on the length of the report. However, 100-350 words is usual, and it would be uncommon for an abstract to form much more than 5% of the entire text of paper.

An abstract, therefore, is quite different from an introduction. An introduction can be longer, it can provide a clear background to the research focus, and it generally moves from the general to the specific (see also TLU Help Sheet: *Introductions*).

An abstract must be written after all other sections are completed to ensure it as concise and precise as possible.

## What to include

In the case of a formal report, there are generally five main sections (see also TLU Help Sheet: *Research Reports*). The abstract mirrors these:

1. Background
2. Purpose / Principal Activity
3. Methodology
4. Results
5. Conclusions and Recommendations

## Example abstract

Note the different stages in the example abstract below. (Numbered 1 to 5).

[1] Accreditation of ISO 9000 continues to grow. Whilst manufacturing organisations were early adopters, in recent years, many organisations from the service sector have pursued accreditation. [2] In this paper, attitudes towards the standard were compared to determine if there were significant differences between the views of manufacturing and service organisations. [3] Empirical data was taken from a survey of 149 service and 160 Australian manufacturing organisations. [4] Results showed that differences were not insignificant, particularly in terms of the benefits sought. For example, [specific results data needed here] [5] The implication of the results suggest that service organisations need to be careful when applying the lessons learnt from the experiences of the manufacturing sector to overcome the problems associated with the implementation of ISO 9000. Further, the results of this study lend support to the argument that the standard is not universally applicable and may need industry-specific tailoring.



## Alternative abstract structures

Please note, however, that not all abstracts follow this exact structure. When writing an abstract for a report that does not involve experimental research, you may not need a section on the methodology. Furthermore, you may not need to summarise findings, but will more likely stress the purpose and focus of the report. This alternative kind of abstract is more common in the humanities and social sciences.

## What not to include

The following elements are generally considered inappropriate for an abstract:

1. Vague generalisations
2. Complex sentences and vocabulary
3. Detailed facts and figures
4. Information presented in graphic format
5. Abbreviations and contractions
6. Citations

## Verb tenses to use

### **General truths as background information** (usually present tense)

*'Accreditation of ISO 9000 continues to grow. ... Whilst manufacturing organisations were early adopters, in recent years, many organisations from the service sector have pursued accreditation.'*

### **Principal activity** (usually past tense/present perfect tense)

*'In this paper, attitudes towards the standard were compared to determine if there were significant differences between the views of manufacturing and service organisations.'*

### **Methodology** (usually past tense)

*'Empirical data was taken from a survey of 149 service and 160 Australian manufacturing organisations.'*

### **Results** (usually past tense)

*'Results showed that differences were not insignificant, particularly in terms of the benefits sought.'*

### **Conclusions** (usually present tense/tentative language and modal auxiliaries)

*'The implication of the results suggest that service organisations need to be careful when applying the lessons learnt from the experiences of the manufacturing sector to overcome the problems associated with the implementation of ISO 9000. Further, the results of this study lend support to the argument that the standard is not universally applicable and may need industry-specific tailoring.'*

The passive voice ('Empirical data was taken' 'Attitudes were compared') is often used as the agents are rarely as significant to focus on as the methods, results, conclusions and recommendations.



## References

Weissberg R. and Buker S., (1990). Writing Up Research: Experimental Report Writing for Students of English, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall

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