Elements of an Effective Abstract

Write the abstract first. If the abstract isn’t interesting, compelling, downright exciting, people aren’t going to read the paper. Use the abstract to set the intellectual goals for your paper. But the paper has to live up to the promise you set. It is a contract with the reader.

I set optimistic goals for myself with the abstract. But as I write, I consult it to make sure I’m on track. If I find I can’t deliver on a part of that promise, I revise the abstract accordingly. I rarely extend the claims made in the abstract.

So, crafting an abstract is a first step in paper writing (and sometimes a first step in research too). But the abstract isn’t static, it must evolve as the paper evolves. It’s a process. Give my process a try. Let me know how it works for you.

Overview: Step through each of the elements below and create one or two sentences per element. Don’t worry about connecting these sentences together for now. Save that for later. Also, all these elements don’t make sense for all papers: It is OK if you don’t have a sentence for some elements.

Bringing the reader proper context…

1. **Problem**: What is the problem your paper addresses? Avoid describing the solution here.

2. **Importance (of the problem or solution)**: How would a solution to this problem change the world? Remember that it’s not obvious to everyone else how important this problem is.

3. **Challenge**: Why is this problem hard? and/or What difficulty do other solutions face?

4. **Background**: A sentence or two bringing context.

**Stating what your paper is going to accomplish. “In this paper, we…”**

5. **Insight**: What did you discover? or How did you approach the problem differently?

6. **Solution (or approach)**: Provide some specific detail about the solution/approach

7. **Evidence**: Summarize the types of evidence you will use in the disposition of your paper.

Now that you have some text for each element above (or most of them), try piecing them together. My order above is a typical way to order things, but it isn’t necessary that you keep the order I have. Once you have a good order, read it over and over. Smooth the rough edges.

You will find that you need to add some “glue” verbiage. It’s usually necessary, for instance, to provide a little more background information to help the elements hang together.

Read through the abstract and revise it, polish it. Avoid repeated words. Have other people read it. This is the most important paragraph of your paper.

Good luck!