

How to write an abstract

Carol Pellowe

Deputy Director, Faculty of Health and Human Sciences, Thames Valley University

At this time of year we seem to enter the conference season, including of course the 10th NHIVNA National Conference in Glasgow. Although securing the funding to attend may be the first priority, it is also an opportunity to think about what you may be able to contribute to the proceedings. Too often nurses fail to share their good practice because they either do not feel it is sufficiently noteworthy or are unsure how to write an abstract. This article covers all you need to know.

What is an abstract?

An abstract is a short summary of your work with the aim of enticing selectors to invite you to present your work. Abstracts are also used in publications where they summarise the key points of the article. As these also appear in web searches the intention of an abstract is to entice the reader to obtain and read the full article. Therefore abstracts should be an accurate and full summary written in such a way as to 'sell' your work.

Getting started

First look at the *call for abstracts* and the areas in which papers are being requested. Think about what you may have done differently over the last year or changes that have taken place in your workplace. Have there been any innovations, changes in practice as a result of audit or research undertaken that relate to these subject headings? It is useful at this stage to talk to colleagues about their perspectives? Talking to colleagues may also give you someone to collaborate with.

Check the last date for submission and how the submission should be made, for example, some conferences will only receive abstracts online, others require an online form to be used that may limit the number of words or characters. In this case, draft your abstract in a Word or other word-processed document and only when happy with it, cut and paste it on to the form. Although some conferences will extend the deadline do not assume

this will be the case. Large conferences like the World AIDS conference have in addition to their standard deadline a 'late breaker' that allows submission of new work after the official deadline. However, this is generally restricted to research completed after the deadline or significant new results recently released. Make sure you have all this information before you start work and ensure you have enough time to plan and redraft your work before the deadline.

Decide whether you would like to present your work orally or as a poster. If you are nervous about public speaking then a poster may appear a more attractive option; however, do bear in mind that a good poster takes a lot of work to prepare and the printing can be expensive. Many trusts now have media services or an audio-visual aids department that can advise and help design your poster, so do establish what services are available locally before deciding.

Writing an abstract

An abstract should include a title, why and what you did, how you did it, what you found and what it means. Think carefully about the title particularly if it is to be included in a searchable database. Whilst it may seem attractive to have a catchy title, it needs to include key words otherwise a database search will not pick it up. For example, if your work is about 'adherence', make sure 'adherence' or a synonym appears in the title. If you are writing an abstract about research there are standard formats you should follow (Table 1). Instead of a hypothesis you may state a problem. The methods describe the key data collection methods, for example, questionnaire or in-depth interview. In the results section, report the key findings only and, if using statistics, their significance. The discussion should include the findings' similarities or not to other equivalent research and the limitations of the study. The conclusion should be the key message from your study and whether it can be generalised or is specific to a particular group.

Table 1. A standard research abstract

Hypothesis
Methods
Results
Discussion
Conclusion

Table 2. Template for non-research abstract

Problem statement
Motivation
Approach
Results/ recommendations
Conclusion

NHIVNA and other conferences invite abstracts on work that is not based on research. There is no formal structure for such submissions but you could try using the template in Table 2. The problem statement should be the answer to the question 'what was the problem/issue?' whereas the motivation section should cover why what is being written about is important. The approach should describe how you dealt with the problem/issue and the results should outline what happened as a result. You may have recommendations to make about, for example, changes in practice and the conclusion should reinforce your key message.

The key points in writing an abstract are to keep it focused, only include essential information, make it interesting and keep within the word count. Abstract writing requires practice and drafts always benefit from feedback from others. Look for people who are practised in abstract writing or failing that ask colleagues who know the subject.

Post submission

Once you have submitted your abstract start thinking and planning the presentation. Ensure you have booked your place at the conference and have travel arrangements in place. If accepted you should stick to the original abstract and not introduce new or different work. Remember there are prizes for presentations at the NHIVNA conference so you may find yourself able to attend another conference as a result. As both oral and poster presentations require significant work you might consider writing an article on the subject for *HIV Nursing*, that way you get two means of spreading the word. Good luck and now get writing!

Correspondence to: Dr Carol Pellowe, Deputy Director, Faculty of Health and Human Sciences, Richard Wells Research Centre Thames Valley University, Paragon House, Boston Manor Road, Brentford, Middlesex TW8 9GA, UK
(email: carol.pellowe@tvu.ac.uk)