

CONFERENCE

Session Report

Journalistic Approach to Writing Better Abstracts

Speaker

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Dr Aiello emphasized the importance of a well-written abstract. After the title, the abstract is the most widely read part of a scientific paper. It is worth putting in the effort to ensure that the abstract grabs the attention of your audience with the key components of the scientific paper. Dr Aiello reviewed how the methods used in journalism could be adapted in the process for writing abstracts. During her presentation, Dr Aiello reviewed the purpose of an abstract, compared scientific abstracts to news stories, and provided a stepwise approach on how to apply a journalistic approach to writing a scientific abstract.

PURPOSE OF AN ABSTRACT

An abstract should summarize essential information of the scientific paper, be concise, nonrepetitive, and should be reader-focused.

FORMAT OF AN ABSTRACT

The abstract should present the sections of a scientific paper in the same order (eg, objective, methods, results and discussion/conclusion). Dr Aiello elaborated on the contents of each section of a paper, and hence the abstract. The objective of the study, or scientific question, should be in the introduction section. The methods section should state how the study was conducted. The results section should include what was found during the study. The answer to the scientific question should be in the discussion/conclusion section. The abstract should be written in a manner that the reader can understand the key points of the study without referring to the scientific paper.

The abstract should focus on the question, main methods, results, and conclusion. This can be achieved by being specific and selective. For example, the abstract may include the primary objective, the study result of the

primary objective, and conclusion drawn from the study results. If space allows, any secondary objectives and their respective results can be included.

HOW TO ADOPT A JOURNALISTIC APPROACH

In journalism, the lead, defined as the first sentence of a news story, is very important. The standard news lead is typically one sentence and includes all essential information for the reader. The sentence contains the 5 W's: who, what, where, when, and why. The lead of a news story and the abstract of a scientific article have the following characteristics in common:

- The lead of a news story is the equivalent of the abstract of a scientific paper.
- After the title, the lead is the first part of a news story seen by the reader. After the title, the first part of a scientific paper that provides context regarding the study is the abstract.
- The lead and the abstract are the most read part of a news story and scientific paper, respectively.
- The lead of a news story and an abstract of a scientific paper should be able to make sense on their own.

Table 1 compares which key parts of an abstract correspond with some of the Ws of a lead.

Table 1. Comparison of the Abstract to a News Lead

Part of the Abstract	"W" of the Lead
Objective	Why?
Methods	How?
Results	What?
Discussion	So what?

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A NEWS STORY AND AN ABSTRACT

A key difference between drafting a news story and an abstract is why the intended reader should take an interest in the presented topic. In an abstract, the discussion/conclusion section will explain why the results of the scientific paper should be of interest and contribute to scientific literature. This component is not commonly found in a news story.

Dr Aiello provided key points on the method of using a journalistic approach to draft an abstract:

- Read the scientific paper carefully.
 - Mark key words and sentences. This will be helpful to highlight key components of the paper.
- Think about the lead technique.
 - Consider the why, how, what, and so what when drafting the objective, methods, results, and discussion sections, respectively.

- Create a list of all marked material.
- Edit to condense and refine content.

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