

Student Abstract Guide

Introduction

SWAA requests that paper, poster, and film abstracts should be 100–250 words. Writing a good abstract is one of the most difficult things for any researcher to do. An abstract must be clear and concise, and it must convey the whole of your paper in just a few words.

As you are writing your abstract, there are several factors to keep in mind:

1. [the purpose and audience of the abstract](#),
2. [the basic components of a paper/poster abstract](#),
3. [the elements that make a good abstract](#), and
4. [tips for writing a good abstract](#).

1. Purpose and Audience of the Abstract

Your purpose in writing this abstract is to get your paper/poster/film accepted for presentation at the SWAA conference. The audience you are trying to impress are the members of the conference review committee, who will be reading dozens of abstracts and trying to decide which papers/poster/films should be presented, and which should be rejected. The wording of the abstract should be very direct. Do not leave your audience guessing at what you mean; tell them. In addition to being clear and brief, your abstract must also be interesting. It must grab your audience and say “look at me.” Your abstract is your first, and maybe your only, opportunity to persuade the review committee that your proposal deserves to be presented.

The people who will come to the conference are a secondary audience for your abstract. They will be reading your abstract to decide if your paper/poster/film is worth their time to attend. However, if you do not impress the review committee first, this will be a moot point.

2. Basic Components of a Paper/Poster Abstract

An abstract must condense your entire paper/poster/film into just one paragraph. The four components of an abstract are:

- Introduction**—Start with one or two sentences which clearly expresses the purpose of your study or presentation. What was your research problem and objectives?
- Methods**—Briefly review the methodology you used to do your research. What did you do, and how did you do it?
- Findings**—Concisely but adequately summarize your main findings. What did you discover in your research?
- Conclusions**—Outline what is significant or useful in your research. What do your findings mean?

For each of these components you are walking the fine line between giving enough information to be clear and informative and staying below the word limit for the entire abstract.

3. Qualities That Make a Good Abstract

A good abstract is:

- Concise**—Each sentence of your abstract must work toward your purpose of impressing the review committee with the academic merit of your presentation.
- Self-contained**—Except for standard abbreviations (e.g. *vs.* for *versus*), define all abbreviations and acronyms. Do not expect the readers to be specialists in all four fields of anthropology. Define any unique terms or usages.
- Accurate**—Clearly present the content and purpose of your paper and only describe information that



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Questions?

Contact [Kimberly Porter Martin](#),
SWAA Conference Program Chair.

actually appears in your presentation. If you are doing a study, state whether your research extends or replicates previous investigations.

- d. **Non-evaluative**—Do not add personal opinions about the value of your work.
- e. **Readable**—The review committee may read dozens of abstracts in a sitting; if your abstract has stilted sentences, misspellings, faulty grammar, poor transitions, or fuzzy logic it will not be viewed favorably.

Take care to edit your abstract before you send it in; remember you are trying to say "Pick me! Pick me!"

4. Tips for Writing a Good Abstract

The following suggestions may help you as your work on writing your abstract:

- a. The topic of your presentation should be clearly stated in the first sentence (and no later than the second sentence). It should not be vague, unclear or buried in the middle of the abstract.
- b. An abstract is nearly always read along with the title, do not repeat or rephrase your title. In fact, do not ever present the same information twice in your abstract.
- c. Use key words from your presentation. Many readers will look for the keywords to quickly understand what a presentation is about. If they do not find the keywords they are looking for in the abstract they may not attend your presentation.
- d. Write in clear and dynamic prose. Use the past tense when describing what was done, but where appropriate use active rather than passive verbs.
- e. Provide logical connections/transitions between the information in your abstract. Your reader should not have to guess where you stopped presenting your introduction and began your methods section.
- f. Use complete short sentences. Do not omit articles or other small words in order to save space.
- g. Vary your sentence structure to avoid choppiness. A boring, repetitious abstract suggests that the presentation will be the same.
- h. Avoid sentences that contain no real information. If a sentence does not move the reader toward your purpose, leave it out.
- i. Use simple words and avoid jargon and acronyms which would take up valuable word space to explain.
- j. Be concrete, but do not let your abstract be too abstract. Your abstract should be close to the limit, but not over it. If your abstract is much shorter than the word limit, you have probably left something out.

Conclusion

Finally, do not just knock out an abstract and send it in. Write a rough draft, edit it for weakness in organization, drop unnecessary information and wordiness, add important information that is missing, strengthen your transitions, read your abstract out loud, and check and double check the grammar, spelling and punctuation. An abstract is not just a bit of busy work that has to be done to get into a conference, but an integral part of your presentation.

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