

Ten steps to developing an abstract for conferences

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Abstract

There is an increasing importance being placed on the dissemination of research and other high quality evidence. This article is the first in a series of three that will assist you in ensuring that your work is presented in the best light at the conference of your choice. In this first article we guide you through the ten steps you need to take to ensure that you submit the best possible abstract to the scientific committee. We also will guide you through the process of selection.

Key words: Research Dissemination ■ Abstract ■ Conference Presentation

The use of conferences as a method of disseminating research findings and good practice is expanding each year (Coad and Devitt, 2006). You can hardly pick up a health or social care journal without seeing a conference advertised and often there is an early call for an abstract or short summary of a potential presentation and/or poster. With this in mind, this article aims to assist readers with a simple ten-step guide to developing an abstract for a conference, whether it is in poster or an oral format. It will draw on the authors' experiences, both as members of scientific review panels and as submitters of abstracts.

Step 1 – Think about the purpose of your abstract

The purpose of an abstract is to enable the conference committee to make an informed decision about your proposed presentation, whether that be oral (frequently referred to as a concurrent session, symposia or workshop) or poster. The decisions of the committee will include content, academic rigor and applicability for the conference and themes.

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Step 2 – Getting started

Take time to consider and plan what you want to say to the audience/readers of your abstract. Look carefully at the flyer for the conference to ensure that you reflect the title, aims and themes of the conference. You can often find previous conference proceedings (such as on the RCN 2006 website) and this is particularly useful in thinking about your style and structure. We also suggest that you ensure that you target your paper to an appropriate conference, that it is one which you are comfortable with and one that meets your relevant expertise and experience. You should also allow ample time to write and submit the abstract, so we recommend that as soon as you decide to submit an abstract, check when the final submission date for abstracts is and work backwards by 1 week.

Most conferences give presenters an option of the preferred mode of presentation. You should decide whether you would prefer an oral or poster presentation. Spoken presentations allow greater interaction and discussion with the audience, but require a level of confidence in public speaking while handling audio-visual equipment. In contrast, poster presentations allow the potential audience to study the content in depth, and the audience is not limited only to those attending a particular concurrent session. However, they demand a level of creative thought as to how best to present the information in a set amount of space. Both methods of presentation are covered in the following two articles in this issue of *BJN*.

Step 3 – Setting out your style

In all cases you should use a word processor for your abstract and ask someone (such as a colleague and/or 'critical friend') to read it. Ensure that you use an appropriate font size, most commonly requested is font size 11–12. If your font size is too small you may find your abstract is rejected.

Keep your points concise. Some conferences provide a box and/or word limit (for example, 250 words). This criterion must be adhered to. The authors of this article have attempted to change box size, usually to their detriment! We have found that using a 'true' font, such as Arial or Times New Roman, allows the maximum wordage within a limited space.

It is generally accepted that your abstract should be written in the past tense and that it should remain constant, i.e. you should not mix tenses. A good literary style is not essential but is helpful. It is also imperative that you check your abstract for spelling mistakes. Repetitive mistakes give a poor impression and are avoidable with proof-reading and word processing packages that have spell check functions.

Step 4 – Avoiding common pitfalls

One common pitfall is an excessive use of jargon in the hope that this will impress. This can have the opposite effect, being off-putting to both reviewers and readers. This is difficult as often you are so immersed in a project you forget that a word is jargon. Similarly, standard abbreviations can be used but they should always be written in full the first time they are used, e.g. general practitioner (GP) or United Kingdom (UK). Try to avoid abbreviations and colloquialisms that are non-standard, no matter how commonly they are used in professional conversation, for example, 'obs' for observations.

Step 5 – Getting the title to appeal

Your title should be clearly set out and concise. It should portray what is in the abstract and what the presentation will include. Some authors are able to think of eye-catching, punchy titles and you may be one of them. However, we have

seen some titles that are so obscure that it is not clear what to expect. On occasions, authors tactically leave out something in the abstract to attract the widest possible audience, but again be careful that the reviewer does not come to your presentation and/or review your poster and feel cheated.

Step 5 – Aim and outcomes

Having decided what your presentation is going to achieve you should portray this clearly to the reader. This includes making the aims and outcomes quite explicit. You may be asked for an aim of your paper and then at a later point in the abstract guidelines they also ask you for learning outcomes. Examples of learning outcomes are given by Quinn (2000), but could look like:

By the end of the presentation, delegates will:

1. Understand some of the philosophical issues of caring for sick children in hospital
2. Explore some of the challenges of involving sick children in their own care in a hospital setting.

Other conferences may ask for aims as well as, or instead of, outcomes. The differences in aims and outcomes can be confusing, therefore a list has been compiled and includes suggested characteristics of each (Table 1).

Step 6 – Content

In the main section you should include some of the key background literature to the paper. This should be informative and not over-verbose in its message. If your paper is a literature review then this section makes up the entirety of the abstract, otherwise a short paragraph to set the scene and gain the reader's interest will suffice. You can use several references for one sentence but again be careful not to include so many references that the reader is disengaged.

If your abstract is in relation to a research project or a study it is relevant to summarize the process. If you are unsure, have a look at some articles in the nursing journals and/or some clear research books (Polit and Beck, 2004). Usually, a few clear sentences about each element, such as aims/hypothesis, sample, methodology, data collection and analysis, is required. However, if the focus of the conference is on research, or your paper is primarily about the process, then this section needs to be increased in both length and depth.

At the end of your abstract you should take the opportunity to remind the reader what your presentation is about with a summary of one or two concluding sentences. Remember, a punchy

Table 1. Defining characteristics of aims and learning outcomes

Aims	Learning outcomes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gives a general statement of the goal to be achieved • Does not give an indication of how the goal is to be achieved • May emphasize the value of the goal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Derived from the aim • Describe the desired end-state in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes. • Usually take the form of a behavioural statement, i.e. 'at the end of the session the participants will be able to...'

and/or thought provoking conclusion may be useful in focusing the reader's attention.

Step 7 – References

It is also important that you submit your abstract with a sample of references on the topic. The conference team may limit this to three references so choose wisely and remember these are for the reader to locate so should be easily accessible, current and ones that are relevant to the conference focus and delegates. Use the referencing style requested – this is most commonly Harvard.

Step 8 – The submission process

Before you submit your abstract, whether it be as hard or electronic copy, invest 5 minutes in a final check. We recommend you use a list:

- Have I completed my abstract according to the conference instructions?
- Have I used the correct format for submission, i.e. electronic or hard copy?
- Have I eliminated every single misspelled word, typographical error and grammatical mistake?
- Have I checked that it is within the word limit and in the correct font?
- Have all the listed authors read and agreed the final draft?
- Have I included all the required forms, biographical information and included my (and co-authors) contacts?

Finally, double check the list again.

Step 9 – What happens next?

The details of what happens to an abstract following submission vary but the general path they follow will not be dissimilar. Abstracts will be sent out to expert reviewers who will be asked to comment on the relevance, currency, rigor and interest. Each abstract usually has at least two 'double-blind' reviewers to read it and will have clear, predetermined guidance for acceptance or rejection. This means that they do not know who the other reviewer is but also do not get any of your personal details. Following this process, they send their recommendations back to the scientific committee for consideration.

If there is a discrepancy between reviewers it is the scientific committee that makes the final decision. They may even ask for a further reviewer to read the abstract. While it is unlikely that the scientific committee accepts a paper that reviewers recommend for rejection it is possible for the reverse to occur. This is because, while the individual reviewers concern is with the quality of the individual submission, the scientific committee is charged with ensuring the balance of papers throughout the conference. On occasions, this may mean that papers are of good quality but may be rejected because of the volume of submissions and the focus and quality of other papers were felt to be better. You may also receive comments from the conference organizers. Do not be put off by the comments, they are there to help you and while rejection is painful, feedback provides you with a learning opportunity.

On some occasions, you may submit first an oral presentation and be offered a poster. Do not feel disappointed if this happens – posters are an excellent medium to access a wide range of the delegates.

Step 10 – Concluding remarks

This is only half of the story. You need to prepare meticulously for your presentation, whether it be for an oral paper or a poster. These are both covered in the following two articles in this issue of *BJN*.

Once you get accepted we recommend you let people know so you can share your experiences with others who are thinking of an abstract for conference but do not feel able. It is only by sharing and supporting others that all of us can improve. **BN**

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