

How to write a killer conference abstract: The first step towards an engaging presentation.

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Helen Kara responds to our previously published guide to writing abstracts and elaborates specifically on the differences for conference abstracts. She offers tips for writing an enticing abstract for conference organisers and an engaging conference presentation. Written grammar is different from spoken grammar. Remember that conference organisers are trying to create as interesting and stimulating an event as they can, and variety is crucial.



The Impact blog has an [‘essential ‘how-to’ guide to writing good abstracts’](#). While this post makes some excellent points, its title and first sentence don’t differentiate between article and conference abstracts. The standfirst talks about article abstracts, but then the first sentence is, ‘Abstracts tend to be rather casually written, perhaps at the beginning of writing when authors don’t yet really know what they want to say, or perhaps as a rushed afterthought just before submission to a journal or a conference.’ This, coming so soon after the title, gives the impression that the post is about both article and conference abstracts.

I think there are some fundamental differences between the two. For example:

- Article abstracts are presented to journal editors along with the article concerned. Conference abstracts are presented alone to conference organisers. This means that journal editors or peer reviewers can say e.g. ‘great article but the abstract needs work’, while a poor abstract submitted to a conference organiser is very unlikely to be accepted.
- Articles are typically 4,000-8,000 words long. Conference presentation slots usually allow 20 minutes so, given that – for good listening comprehension – presenters should speak at around 125 words per minute, a conference presentation should be around 2,500 words long.
- Articles are written to be read from the page, while conference presentations are presented in person. Written grammar is different from spoken grammar, and there is nothing so tedious for a conference audience than the old-skool approach of reading your written presentation from the page. Fewer people do this now – but still, too many. It’s unethical to bore people! You need to engage your audience, and conference organisers will like to know how you intend to hold their interest.



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The competition for getting a conference abstract accepted is rarely as fierce as the competition for getting an article accepted. Some conferences don't even receive as many abstracts as they have presentation slots. But even then, they're more likely to re-arrange their programme than to accept a poor quality abstract. And you can't take it for granted that your abstract won't face much competition. I've recently read over 90 abstracts submitted for the [Creative Research Methods conference in May](#) – for 24 presentation slots. As a result, I have four useful tips to share with you about how to write a killer conference abstract.

First, your conference abstract is a sales tool: you are selling your ideas, first to the conference organisers, and then to the conference delegates. You need to make your abstract as fascinating and enticing as possible. And that means making it different. So take a little time to think through some key questions:

- What kinds of presentations is this conference most likely to attract? How can you make yours different?
- What are the fashionable areas in your field right now? Are you working in one of these areas? If so, how can you make your presentation different from others doing the same? If not, how can you make your presentation appealing?

There may be clues in the call for papers, so study this carefully. For example, we knew that the [Creative Research Methods conference](#), like all general methods conferences, was likely to receive a majority of abstracts covering data collection methods. So we stated up front, in the call for papers, that we knew this was likely, and encouraged potential presenters to offer creative methods of planning research, reviewing literature, analysing data, writing research, and so on. Even so, around three-quarters of the abstracts we received focused on data collection. This meant that each of those abstracts was less likely to be accepted than an abstract focusing on a different aspect of the research process, because we wanted to offer delegates a good balance of presentations.

Currently fashionable areas in the field of research methods include research using social media and autoethnography/ embodiment. We received quite a few abstracts addressing these, but again, in the interests of balance, were only likely to accept one (at most) in each area. Remember that conference organisers are trying to create as interesting and stimulating an event as they can, and variety is crucial.

Second, write your abstract well. Unless your abstract is for a highly academic and theoretical conference, wear

your learning lightly. Engaging concepts in plain English, with a sprinkling of references for context, is much more appealing to conference organisers wading through sheaves of abstracts than complicated sentences with lots of long words, definitions of terms, and several dozen references. Conference organisers are not looking for evidence that you can do really clever writing (save that for your article abstracts), they are looking for evidence that you can give an entertaining presentation.

Third, conference abstracts written in the future tense are off-putting for conference organisers, because they don't make it clear that the potential presenter knows what they'll be talking about. I was surprised by how many potential presenters did this. If your presentation will include information about work you'll be doing in between the call for papers and the conference itself (which is entirely reasonable as this can be a period of six months or more), then make that clear. So, for example, don't say, 'This presentation will cover the problems I encounter when I analyse data with homeless young people, and how I solve those problems', say, 'I will be analysing data with homeless young people over the next three months, and in the following three months I will prepare a presentation about the problems we encountered while doing this and how we tackled those problems'.

Fourth, of course you need to tell conference organisers about your research: its context, method, and findings. It will also help enormously if you can take a sentence or three to explain what you intend to include in the presentation itself. So, perhaps something like, 'I will briefly outline the process of participatory data analysis we developed, supported by slides. I will then show a two-minute video which will illustrate both the process in action and some of the problems encountered. After that, again using slides, I will outline each of the problems and how we tackled them in practice.' This will give conference organisers some confidence that you can actually put together and deliver an engaging presentation.

So, to summarise, to maximise your chances of success when submitting conference abstracts:

1. Make your abstract fascinating, enticing, and different.
2. Write your abstract well, using plain English wherever possible.
3. Don't write in the future tense if you can help it – and, if you must, specify clearly what you will do and when.
4. Explain your research, and also give an explanation of what you intend to include in the presentation.

While that won't guarantee success, it will massively increase your chances. Best of luck!

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About the Author

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