



How to write a better abstract

Owen D Williamson
Editorial Secretary

Purpose

- Titles attract attention - abstracts generate interest
- Abstract should be a self contained scientific paper
 - summarise key points
 - don't hold back important findings – these stimulate discussion
 - presentations can add detail or explanation

READ THE INSTRUCTIONS!

- Deadline for submission of abstracts
 - the Editorial Secretary reserves the right to extend the deadline to all, but NO abstracts will be accepted after the deadline
- Word limit
 - several authors initially did not include valuable data in their abstracts because they self-imposed a more restrictive word limit
 - (or had they recycled their abstracts from other meetings with a more restrictive word limit without reading the instructions first?!)
 - our limit was 550 words
 - Watson and Crick won Nobel Prize with 900 words

Introduction

- Define gap in knowledge

Aims

- The aim is to plug the gap in knowledge
- State the aim of the study clearly and in simple words
 - The aim of this study was...

Methods

- Should allow replication of study
- Description of study type
 - RCT
 - cohort studies versus case series
- Inclusion/exclusion criteria
- Sample size, including rationalising minimum clinically important difference in outcomes
- CONSORT
- Outcome measures
- Statistical methodology
- NO RESULTS

Results

- Demographics
 - important confounders
- Pre/post values
- Summary statistics
 - median (ranges) unless data is normally distributed
- Inferential statistics if appropriate
 - too many statistics are worse than not enough
 - if in doubt consult a biostatistician (the earlier the better)

Results

- Are the results plausible?
 - eg median should lie within range
- Do the results make sense?
 - remember if you do enough comparisons, some associations will appear significant by chance alone

Discussion/Conclusions

- Confine to interpretation of results
- Are aims achieved?
- Relevance to clinical practice
- Need for further studies

Coherence

- Ensure title, data and conclusions add up to the same thing

Handy Hints

- Avoid jargon (jargon obfuscates!)
 - use little words, but define abbreviations
 - jargon is used to exclude readers or hide the authors lack of understanding
 - (OK...in some circumstances, jargon is used as a linguistic shortcut)
- Use the spell-checker
 - sloppy spelling suggests sloppy science
- The less the reviewer/editor has to handle your abstract, the more likely it is to be accepted

More Handy Hints

- If asked for revisions, consult with co-authors prior to the evening before revisions are due
- If in doubt, discuss with editorial secretary
 - outcomes can be negotiated...as long as the editorial secretary is satisfied
- Remember the aim of the review process is to help not hinder, but...
- Ignore the review process at your peril!

Review process

- The Editorial Secretary has three, albeit related, responsibilities
 - to collate, select and prepare the abstracts for publication for the Annual Scientific Meeting (SSA Constitution)
 - to ensure that the SSA and its members are best represented in the international spine research forum
 - to ensure that the JBJS standards of publication are upheld
- There is no further review by the JBJS-Br after abstracts are submitted for publication by Editorial Secretaries

Review process

- The aims of the review process are:
 - to facilitate the submission of abstracts that enable authors to best demonstrate the scientific merit of their studies
 - to ensure that abstracts are judged on scientific merit alone
 - to ensure that abstracts accepted for publication in the JBJS-Br best represent the authors and the SSA

Review process

Abstract received by SSA Secretary and de-identified with respect to authors, institutions and interests



Abstracts sent to Editorial Secretary and reviewers



Reviewers recommend accept, accept with revision, reject and recommend mode of presentation



Editorial Secretary collates reviewers' recommendations and returns re-identified abstracts to authors for revision
(Note: the Editorial Secretary remains blinded to interests throughout)

Review process

If revision is satisfactory, author is notified of acceptance and mode of presentation, abstract is published in conference handbook and abstract will be forwarded to JBJS-Br for publication



If revision is unsatisfactory, but presentation is of interest, author is notified of acceptance and mode of presentation, abstract is published in conference handbook and abstract is NOT forwarded to JBJS-Br for publication



If revision is unsatisfactory, but presentation is NOT of interest, author is notified of rejection.

owen.williamson@med.monash.edu.au