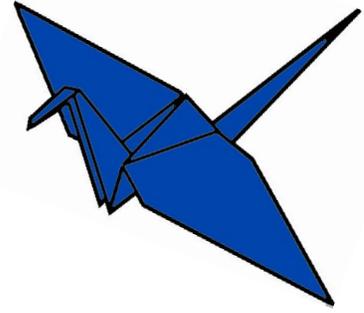


Create. Compose. Communicate.

YOUR WRITING RESOURCE.

Writing Successful Abstracts



CONTEXT:

By definition, context is essentially what surrounds a thing. In other words, in order to understand a snippet of conversation, we often ask, “He said that in what context?” When we provide context for our readers, we are establishing a comfortable common ground, a shared understanding that provides an entry point into the larger or more specific ideas of our project. Common ground might take the form of a shared belief, a kind of truism, a basic principle of the field. Frequently this takes the form of a brief survey of the field or an overview of a current situation. This might include what those in the discipline already know to be true, a point of conventional wisdom, something we’ve all seen and heard, a primary text, a case study, or an anecdote of some kind.

PROBLEM:

The problem is essentially establishing a deficit. A deficit in this sense refers to a gap in knowledge or what might be misunderstood or overlooked. The problem is what our research question or project is trying to solve. This might be, for example, a practical or real life question (how can we best distribute H1N1 vaccine?) or it can be a theoretical or conceptual question (to what degree is marital behavior determined by intergenerational influences?). As researchers, we begin with the problem, but often by the time we are ready to write our abstracts, introductions, or proposals, the problem has moved into the background, obscured by the details of our work. However, in terms of meeting the reader’s needs, the problem is an essential and necessary feature. The reader’s level of investment, and thus the grade, the acceptance, the funding for your project hinges upon how successfully you articulate the problem.

RESPONSE:

This is generally your summary or description of your paper or project, which you position in dialogue with the problem as you’ve established it. Depending on the nature of your project, in your response you might explicitly state your main point or thesis or you might present your hypothesis and generalize your results. In addition, research that relies on primary data often includes an abbreviated description of the methodology used.

Moving the Reader from “So what?” to “I see.”

Abstracts, at heart, are decision-making documents. Based on the abstract, readers decide whether to read your article, support your proposal, grant you funding, or accept you to a conference. To write a successful abstract, include these three key components:

Context, Problem, Response.

C → P → R