

Writing and Tutorial Center

Graduate Thesis: Crafting an Abstract

An abstract is a brief summary of a longer piece of research writing (graduate thesis, doctoral dissertation, research paper) which succinctly states the purposes, methods, and results/conclusions of your research. You will need to write an abstract to complete a thesis, to submit a research paper to an academic journal, to write a book/research proposal, or to apply for research grants. Your abstract enables other readers to determine the relevance of your writing to their research process.

Abstracts are usually short (approximately 100-300 words) and some disciplines may have a specific word limit. Since it's often the first thing people read, making it accurate and engaging is essential. Your “thesis in a nutshell,” it is intended to give a short but complete synopsis of your research as a whole. Think of it as the summary of a book you’d find on the back cover.

For a thesis or dissertation, include the abstract on a separate page after the title page and acknowledgements, but before the table of contents.

TIPS

Keep it focused and concise—don't use vague terms like “interesting” or “important”.

Avoid passive sentences, obscure jargon, and redundant word choice.

Be careful using personal pronouns, personal opinions, or speculative language; some fields do, others don't. Check with your advisor if you're unsure.

Stick to what's most important and leave out lengthy literature references; there will plenty of time for that in the literature review.

If you use any citations or abbreviations, make sure everything is clearly defined.

Edit ruthlessly—each word should add value.

Read it aloud and ask yourself, does it make sense to someone unfamiliar with your field? You can always share it with a peer (or tutor!) to review it for clarity and coherence.

START WITH A CLEAR PURPOSE

What question or gap in research you are aiming to fill? What practical or theoretical problem does this thesis relate to? How does the question or problem fit within the context or your field? Why does your research matter? Use clear, direct language to define your goals. This part of the abstract is usually in the present or simple past tense.

SUMMARIZE YOUR PROCESS / METHODS

If some part of your thesis includes process writing, which describes how you created something, this should be included. What actions did you take? (e.g. conduct interviews, compare case studies, apply critical lenses)? For the visual arts, how did you make this work—medium, formal/functional qualities, context, etc.? Did you use quantitative or qualitative methods? This portion is usually in the simple past tense.

PRESENT THE FINDINGS

What are the most significant conclusions or main research results? What is your answer to the problem or question? What did you make? How does this project engage the world? How does this project foster insight within your field? The results/conclusions are usually written in the simple present tense.

HUMANITIES THESIS ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of silent movies as a mode of shared experience in the US during the early twentieth century. At this time, high immigration rates resulted in a significant percentage of non-English-speaking citizens. These immigrants faced numerous economic and social obstacles, including exclusion from public entertainment and modes of discourse (newspapers, theater, radio).

Incorporating evidence from reviews, personal correspondence, and diaries, this study demonstrates that silent films were an affordable and inclusive source of entertainment. It argues for the accessible economic and representational nature of early cinema. These concerns are particularly evident in the low price of admission and in the democratic nature of the actors' exaggerated gestures, which allowed the plots and action to be easily grasped by a diverse audience despite language barriers.

PHOTOGRAPHY THESIS ABSTRACT

This thesis explores a personal and cultural tension between rootedness and restlessness, set against the backdrop of my native Midwest. The large-format portrait and landscape photographs reflect a paradoxical longing to pull up stakes and put down roots, and the liminal state we often dwell in as a result. Playing on the conception of the Midwest as a transient zone to be passed though en route to somewhere else, the work refers to the pervasive belief that our greatest hopes and potentials can only be realized in some other place, at some future or past time. It's a syndrome I grapple with myself, centrifugally lapping the country in perpetual search for an impossible landing pad. As American society drifts increasingly towards untethered mobility and develops a homogenized temporary landscape in its wake, our identifications with distinct regional home places are more likely to reach mythical proportions. As such, the Midwest not just becomes my centripetal anchor, but also my stage—a metaphorical intersection between movement and stasis drawing from observation, experience, memory and fantasy. Here, my personal myth of place unfolds.

When possible, write the abstract last, after your thesis is complete. That way you'll have a full view of your work and can summarize it more accurately. If you are asked by your professor to write your abstract before you have completed (or started) your main thesis work, simply write it to fit what you aim to accomplish, and edit it as you progress with your thesis work. Nothing is set in stone!

Remember, each department may have unique requirements, make sure to check with your advisor or department for specifics.

["How to Write an Abstract"](#) from Scribbr.

[Examples of Abstracts](#) (static hyperlink to a PDF).