

Tip from the Trenches

The Art of the Abstract

If one thing is more challenging than writing good scientific and technical documentation, it's summing up that content. Yes, we're talking about the dreaded abstract, that all-too-short blurb that readers use to get a snapshot of your paper — and to decide whether to read it or toss it aside.

The point of the abstract is simple: Provide a summary of a technical or scientific paper. For many experts, trying to sum up an entire project in 150 words or less is a herculean task. If that statement applies to you, take these tips to heart.



- **First, write an effective paper.** When you know your audience and write content that is clear, concise, and engaging, summing it up becomes much less daunting. Complete the document before even thinking about the abstract.
- **Include the pertinent information.** A good abstract states the problem, approach, solution, and primary findings, results, or contributions of the paper. Avoid vague or mysterious writing here: *As a result, we produced x, y, and z*, not *Three results were produced* (with no statement of what those results were).
- **Know what to leave out.** You don't have the space to explain your motivation for writing the document or to give readers background or extraneous information. They'll get all that in the paper itself, so leave such discussion out of the abstract.
- **Resist the urge to copy and paste.** Don't lift passages verbatim from your document, as readers will surely notice.
- **Help readers find you.** Abstracts are often the only part of a paper that is posted online, with the remainder of the content being locked down. As a result, the abstract is the target for search engines. Include terms — both specific to your document and applicable to the general subject area — that your target audience is likely to use when looking for content.
- **Be brief and get active.** We'll say it again: Be direct. Include the basics, and leave out the extras. A great way to do this is to use active verbs: Give readers the facts rather than *Readers will find the facts in the abstract*. And *We cracked the code* rather than *The code was deciphered by the project team*.

Yes, you can learn to do this!

Are you looking for a writing coach who understands the types of documents you have to write? Contact Hurley Write toll-free at 877-24-WRITE (877-249-7483) or by email (pam@hurleywrite.com) for more information about our training courses.