

# Planning, developing and writing an effective conference abstract

*John Albarran gives a step-by-step guide to ensuring the highest standards (and increasing the chance of acceptance) when preparing an abstract for submission.*

In the past decade, the profession has witnessed a growth in the range of scientific conferences designed to meet the needs of general as well as specialist groups. This has stimulated a rise in the number of conference abstracts submitted by nurses wishing to disseminate aspects of their research or examples of innovation and good practice. As a result, the process of selecting abstracts is far more competitive and members of scientific panels have to make harsh decisions about which papers to accept and include in their conference programmes. This development is clearly an indicator of a maturing research-based discipline. However, a successful abstract submission requires meticulous planning and developing a style of writing that is clear, succinct and informative. The aim of this paper is to review the essential stages of developing a strategy for writing a conference abstract that increases the chance of acceptance.

## Introduction

Although the volume of abstract submissions led by nurses has increased, there is still much variation in standards (Haigh, 2004). A lack of experience and inattention to detail during the writing stages are contributory factors. More usually, individuals will be unsuccessful when an abstract:

- ♦ Lacks stated aims and objectives
- ♦ Is unstructured, fragmented and lacking rigour
- ♦ Presents results in a vague and confusing manner
- ♦ Fails to convey the implications for the profession simply and succinctly

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♦ Undersells—or oversells—the originality or uniqueness of the work  
Condensing the results of a project or recently completed study concisely is challenging, yet crucial in ensuring an abstract meets the presentation standards of the scientific committee. The art of creating and writing a successful conference abstract is a skilled activity requiring attention to detail and an ability to write clearly, fluently and informatively. These skills can, however, be learned through practice and guidance (Lindquist, 2003; Haigh, 2006).

## The purpose of an abstract

An abstract is usually an 'abstracted' short summary or synopsis of a larger piece of work that is prepared with a particular focus, aimed at a specific audience. Typically, a conference abstract is likely to be judged by a number of audiences for different purposes and this needs to be considered in the planning stages.

The first audience comprises experts who serve on the scientific panel of reviewers. Typically your abstract will be 'blind' reviewed, often by a minimum of two members of the panel, according to set criteria. The abstract needs to persuade reviewers that the proposed work is of a high standard, sufficiently rigorous, makes a distinct contribution and supports the conference objectives. If the meeting has an international agenda, the relevance of the content to a wider global community will form part of the assessment. Therefore, it is important to integrate statements or references that stress international applicability as this will strengthen the standing of your abstract.

The second audience comprises conference delegates, who will assess accepted abstracts on whether the content is relevant to their work. The abstract outline will thus be influential in guiding delegates' decisions about which presentations to attend

or posters to visit. Stimulating delegate interest will be largely dependent on the clarity and coherence of your abstract, the originality of ideas and application to practice.

A third but less obvious audience includes journalists. Media representatives (from the profession, national newspapers or regional television) may be covering a conference, and will scan the programme handbook for newsworthy items. Abstracts thus provide primary sources of information and may lead to additional project exposure in the form of a news item. It may also lead to an approach from a journal editor, inviting you to develop a fuller paper for publication based on your poster or presentation. Additionally, to promote accessibility of work presented at conference, accepted abstracts in the form of 'conference proceedings' may be published in journals linked with specific associations. It is thus vital that abstract layout and writing conventions are adhered to, as opportunities to edit or correct the text may not be possible before publication.

## Starting with background work

For the majority of nurses, the decision to prepare an abstract will often be in response to a conference flyer or advert in a journal inviting submissions. Venue location can prove an incentive and prompt enthusiasm. In choosing which conference to submit an abstract to Coad et al (2007) advise novice authors to target events that will not raise their discomfort levels, but will help develop their experience and expertise. It is therefore wise to read any information relating to the event carefully and visit the conference website. A number of issues will have a bearing on the writing stages.

## What is the title and what are the conference themes?

Does the title suggest that the conference is

**Table 1.**  
**Typical list of instructions for preparing a conference abstract**

List of authors, institutions and contact details
Contact details of corresponding author
Preference for presentation mode (oral or poster)
Title (must be short, not more than 12 words)
Structure of presentation (e.g. research)
List of learning outcomes (if applicable)
Word limit (often 200–300 words maximum)
Font size (not larger than 12 point)
Specified type of font (e.g. Times, Arial)
Specified number of references (maximum of three)
Specified referencing system (Vancouver or Harvard)
List of key words (maximum of four)
Declaration of any conflict of interests
Check whether tables/figures are permitted

appealing specifically to nurses in a specialist field of practice or aimed at a wider professional community? Are the themes broad enough to enable you to tailor an abstract to a specific topic area?

Ensuring that the content of an abstract complements and reflects the overall aims of the conference is vital to acceptance, as these aspects form part of the assessment criteria.

### Who will be in the audience?

Identifying whether delegates represent a cross-section of the profession (practitioners, researchers, managers and educators) or come from a multidisciplinary background is important. Is the conference seeking to attract national and international delegates?

Thinking about these issues will make it possible to consider the choice of terms and writing style to adopt in the abstract. The use of language should be appropriate, inclusive and resonate with conference participants.

### What is the format for an abstract? How, where and when to submit it?

Increasingly there is an expectation that potential contributors will submit their abstracts online.

Most events will provide a prescriptive set of guidelines for preparing an abstract (*Table 1*) but, as these may vary between conferences, ensure you have checked (and

your abstract conforms to) the specific requirements in each case. For research-based papers, a structured abstract with standard headings will be required (background, aims, methods, results and discussion/conclusions). In others, a short paragraph that includes the aims and a list of learning outcomes for the presentation may be preferred. Failure to convey methodological clarity or conform to requirements may result in the abstract being declined. Reading and strictly following the instructions is vital at the writing stage.

The abstract may need to be e-mailed, uploaded or written directly into an online form. You may also need to decide whether to register for an oral or poster presentation at this stage. Some organizers request an abstract first and then decide on the required format for the presentation. The decision is not a reflection on the quality of the abstract.

The duration of oral presentations varies between conferences, lasting from 6–20 minutes. A degree of confidence with public speaking, dealing with audience questions and using audiovisual aids is required. In contrast, preparing an eye-catching, thought-provoking poster that engages delegates demands skill and creativity. There are usually specific instructions to follow regarding size and formatting.

Registering as a conference presenter and submitting an abstract is time consuming. It is advisable to become familiar with this process, the guidelines for writing the abstract and the date for final submission. Following abstract registration, individuals will usually receive confirmation with a reference number for future correspondence.

### Writing and shaping the abstract Title

Over the years, it has become the vogue to have catchy and snappy titles. However, these can be very UK-centric and may not be understood by reviewers and delegates from abroad. Additionally, should the abstracts be published, future location through bibliographic databases might prove difficult, particularly when key words or type of study have been omitted from the title. The title should capture the essence of the content. If you are reporting the findings of research, it might be sensible to include the study design used. Posing a question within the title is also an effective strategy to prompt delegates' interest. Having a provocative statement as a title can work but a certain level of confidence may be required.

### Main body

Because of the word limits imposed, it is important to be certain about the messages you wish to impart. Set time aside and

**Table 2.**  
**Suggested headings for non-research papers**

Background/problem (state the nature and scope of the problem)
Aims/objectives of the presentation
Intervention (state what activities undertaken, on whom and by whom)
Results (describe the outcomes or changes in practice)
Discussion (what now? what are the implications for patient care, multidisciplinary working, bed-occupancy, waiting times, changing roles ...?)

decide on the aims, the structure and issues to be covered. Reflect on these aspects as well as on technical competence. An abstract that conveys a professional image will make a favourable impression with the target audiences.

For an abstract based on previous research the use of standard headings is appropriate. If your work does not fall into this category, the abstract content must still be logically organized and systematic. In the case of a practice audit or literature review, the headings in *Table 2* might be useful. Whatever approach you adopt for laying out the text, be sure to make the aims explicit.

## Writing stages

Once the headings are agreed set about planning the balance of the text. A couple of sentences, underpinned by the literature, should be adequate to set the scene and theoretical background. Be concise and impress on the reader the nature of the problem and rationale for the project or enquiry. Methods or strategies employed to achieve your aim should then be briefly outlined. Haigh (2007) suggests that the inclusion of statistical data, where appropriate, may increase the chances of acceptance since it may be expected that the findings will fuel debate.

The areas needing most attention will be constructing a summary of the results and conclusions or implications for practice. Be economical with your choice of words—avoid squandering them by describing that the project formed part of a thesis, or saying who funded the study. With regard to references, be judicious and use those that demonstrate currency, appropriateness and focus on the topic.

There are other issues to be aware of when writing the abstract. It is good practice to leave out jargon, sound bites and colloquialisms as these may mean little to reviewers or conference participants from outside the UK. Some conferences may insist on omitting abbreviations or permit them, if written in full before use in the text.

In composing the content, use simple and standard terms that will communicate clearly with your reading public. Develop a writing style that is accessible and seek to enliven the text by deploying active verbs. Since the project you intend to present is historical, it is acceptable to write in the past tense, but take care not to mix your tenses. Importantly, avoid developing a pretentious and verbose literary style as this may obscure meaning and confuse readers. If available, obtain a sample of previously published abstracts so that you can gauge the approach and writing style used.

## Improving the quality

Once you have completed the abstract, there are other additional steps necessary for improving the quality of the final draft. Planning for revisions and seeking feedback from peers are quality-control activities you cannot ignore. An experienced critical friend can provide editorial advice and offer a constructive critique on your drafts, which will serve to raise the standard of your work. Give them plenty of time and do not expect immediate turnaround.

Finally, to augment the appearance and image of the final abstract, Lindquist (1993) recommends attending to the three 'Rs', namely reducing, refining and reviewing.

## Reduction

Go through the document with a critical eye and remove redundant words. Edit long passages into shorter sentences. Use figures rather than words for numbers (e.g. 11 rather than eleven) and where possible discard irrelevant detail and repetitious text.

## Refinement

Sharpen the focus of the abstract and make sure that key messages are implicit. To prepare an abstract that is clear, concise, logical and informative, use short words, delete ambiguous terms, jargon, superfluous statistics and *P* values. Amend and correct the abstract according to feedback. Undertake final touches, such as spacing, alignment of

text, tenses and consistency in the use of language. Use gender-neutral terms and culturally sensitive language.

## Review

At this stage, scrupulous proofreading is mandatory. Edit for grammar, punctuation, conformity, accuracy of data, spelling errors and appearance. With the advent of word-processing software, most of these problems are avoidable. In many cases, it is a failure to attend to these details that leads to rejection. The objective of the reviewing process should be on improving the readability, presentation style and scholarship of the abstract, and checking that it conforms to abstract standards laid down by the conference's scientific committee. These strategies are ultimately about placing your abstract in an optimal position and creating a positive and professional image. Finally, before submitting the abstract create a checklist to ensure you have addressed all requirements as laid out in the conference guidelines (Coad et al, 2007).

## Conclusions

Writing an abstract for publication is a skilled art. For nurses to be successful in an increasingly competitive arena they need to invest in forward planning, developing a strategy that ensures that their work is of an appropriate academic standard in keeping with the aspirations of the conference, and well presented. This paper has outlined some of the processes involved in the writing of a clearly informed, focused and cogent abstract. While it is recognized that there is no substitute for experience, the support of colleagues as 'critical' readers and peers can play an important role in enabling inexperienced practitioners to gain confidence and competence in this area of professional practice.

- Coad J, Devitt P, Hardacre J (2007) Ten steps to developing an abstract for conferences. *Br J Nurs* 16(7): 396–397
- Haigh CA (2006) The art of the abstract. *Nurse Educ Today* 26: 355–57
- Lindquist RA (1993) Strategies for writing a competitive research abstract. *Dimens Crit Care Nurs* 12(1): 46–53

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