ABSTRACTS

An abstract is a paragraph, often between 100 and 350 words, that expresses the main claim and argument of a paper. An abstract says everything of central importance in a way that gives the reader a clear overview of what is contained in the essay. It should include the few things you would like your reader to remember long after the details of your paper may be forgotten. Science journals, for instance, usually publish abstracts at the beginning of articles so that readers can make quick decisions about whether the article is relevant or interesting. If the reader decides to read the entire article, the abstract functions as a map of the writer's argument or discussion. Most dissertations, some papers in the sciences and social sciences, and many JPs and senior theses require abstracts.

Checking Your Thesis and Argument

While the primary purpose of an abstract is to guide readers, it can also be a useful tool for writers. You can use an abstract to check that you have a clear grasp of your thesis and argument. If you can state them clearly in a few sentences—and in such a way that someone who doesn't know the subject will still be able to understand your main idea—then you know you've got a good grasp of the ideas you are trying to express.

You can also give an abstract (or an outline) to readers whose opinions you would like to have, but who don't have time to read through an entire draft of your paper. By looking at a well-written abstract, your professor or a friend will quickly be able to get the gist of your paper. And since abstracts are brief, you can reasonably ask a reader to look at a number of drafts as your thinking and writing progress.

Long Papers

Often when you force yourself to say in a few words what your plan of argument is, it turns out to be different from what you've been writing. Especially when you are working on long papers where it is easy to lose track of a complex argument, such as a JP or senior thesis, you can use multiple abstracts to see where you need to refine your ideas or reorganize your argument. As you work on your essay, make a habit of regularly composing abstracts and comparing them to your drafts. Sometimes the abstract version is better because it represents the essence of your ideas and their logical structure, which may be lost in the paper itself. If that's the case, go back and revise the paper. If you notice differences between the latest version of your abstract and your latest draft, but are not sure how to reconcile the two, review your material with your professor, preceptor, or with a tutor at the Writing Center. When you are working on a big writing project, it is also a good idea to produce a final abstract before you submit your paper. If you have a clear and coherent abstract, *and if the paper actually corresponds to it,* then you can be confident that your essay is probably clear and coherent as well.

Abstracts as Introductions
One further useful function of an abstract is that it can help to solve the knotty problem of what to do in an introduction. With a little revision, an abstract can often make a good first paragraph, or a summary paragraph, in an introduction.

Sample Abstracts
Because it's often helpful to see some examples to understand how abstracts work, we've included a few from different academic disciplines below. The samples from the humanities and social sciences are from dissertations; the science abstract is from a periodical. If you are writing a JP or senior thesis, you should refer to the appropriate style manual for your field of study to see if there are particular conventions you should follow in your abstract.

Anthropology
"I wanted to know how Laotian Hmong create meaning and continuity in their lives while adapting to new situations and taking advantage of new opportunities, or confronting the lack of them in Visalia, California. To answer this question, I analyzed conflicts in three settings where Hmong are in regular interaction with dominant practices: their garden plots, work and welfare, and youthful marriages. I found that identity is not homogeneous; that the processes of identity formation vary by gender and generation and are contested within the ethnic community and between Hmong and the surrounding society; and that the informal networks of Hmong women place them at the center of these processes, as well as at the center of cultural maintenance and grassroots mobilization. I used in-depth interviews and participant observation to investigate the relationship between structures of power and Hmong resistance to or negotiation with that power. This study adds a generational perspective to feminist theories and a gendered and generational perspective to anthropological theories on adaptation and identity among immigrants."

Sharon Arlene Bays. Abstract. "Cultural Politics and Identity Formation in a San Juaquin Valley Hmong Community (California)" Dissertation. University of Southern California, 1994.

Archaeology
"Human remains dating to more than 780,000 years ago are associated with a rich faunal and lithic assemblage in the Pleistocene cave site of Gran Dolina (TD), Sierra de Atapuerca, Burgos, Spain. The micromammal species represent the late Biharian (*Mimomys savini* zone), and the lithic objects represent pre-Acheulean technology (Mode 1) and comes from the TD6 level below the Matuyama-Brunhes boundary. The Gran Dolina hominid fossils cannot be comfortably accommodated in any of the defined *Homo* species. They could be considered a primitive form of *Homo heidelbergensis,* but a new species might be named in the future if the sample is enlarged. The new human fossil evidence demonstrates that Western Europe was settled at least since the late early Pleistocene."

E. Carbonell, et al. "Lower Pleistocene Hominids and Artifacts from Atapuerca-TD6 (Spain)." Science *14 August 1995: 826.*

"This is a study of the impact of feminism, the suffrage movement, and the public debate about the nature and status of women upon the British novel from 1890 to 1914. I argue that social, legal, and economic changes in women's lives rendered traditional narrative structures based upon romantic desire and marital closure insufficient, and forced Edwardian novelists to

confront the limitations and ideological implications of those structures. The resultant narrative strategies in Edwardian novels about women and feminism elucidate the transition from the Victorian novel to the modern novel, and underscore the intimate link between feminist challenges to traditional social organization and the artistic challenges to formal conventions which characterize literary modernism. . . .”

Jane Eldridge Miller. Abstract. “Rebel Women: Feminism, Modernism, and the Edwardian Novel.” Dissertation. Princeton University, 1993.

Philosophy
“In this work I explore the question of whether visual perception produces knowledge, or correct representations, of the external world. I argue that it does not, and that the way the world looks is rather a function of the properties of perceivers. I also argue, however, that it is not necessary for perceivers to have correct representations of the environment. The common sense view that the purpose of vision is to make acquaintance with the environment possible is mistaken. This conception of the purpose of vision can and ought to be recast, and the commitment to visual knowledge abandoned. The argument is set against the background of the computational theory of vision which is currently the central paradigm in vision research and a powerful tool for philosophers who wish to defend the view that vision does lead to acquaintance with the environment. I propose that even as powerful a tool as computational vision fails to support the claim that visual experience correctly represents the properties of the external world. . . .”

Ian Gold. Abstract. “Color and Other Illusions: a Philosophical Theory of Vision (Neurophilosopy)” Dissertation. Princeton University, 1993.

Related Writing Center Handouts
Developing a Central Idea or "Thesis"
Finding a Topic