Abstracts are summaries written to give readers the gist of a report or presentation. Sometimes they are published in conference proceedings or databases. In courses in the sciences, social sciences, and engineering, you may be asked to create abstracts of your proposed projects and completed reports and essays. Abstracts are brief, typically 100–200 words, sometimes even shorter. Three common kinds are informative abstracts, descriptive abstracts, and proposal abstracts.

INFORMATIVE ABSTRACTS

Informative abstracts state in one paragraph the essence of a whole paper about a study or a research project. That one paragraph must mention all the main points or parts of the paper: a description of the study or project, its methods, the results, and the conclusions. Here is an example of the abstract accompanying a seven-page essay that appeared in the Journal of Clinical Psychology:

The relationship between boredom proneness and health-symptom reporting was examined. Undergraduate students (N = 200) completed the Boredom Proneness Scale and the Hopkins Symptom Checklist. A multiple analysis of covariance indicated that individuals with high boredom-proneness total scores reported significantly higher ratings on all five subscales of the Hopkins Symptom Checklist (Obsessive–Compulsive, Somatization, Anxiety, Interpersonal Sensitivity, and Depression). The results suggest that boredom proneness may be an important element to consider when assessing symptom reporting. Implications for determining the effects of boredom proneness on...
psychological- and physical-health symptoms, as well as the application in clinical settings, are discussed.

— Jennifer Sommers and Stephen J. Vodanovich, “Boredom Proneness”

The first sentence states the nature of the study being reported. The next summarizes the method used to investigate the problem, and the following one gives the results: students who, according to specific tests, are more likely to be bored are also more likely to have certain medical or psychological symptoms. The last two sentences indicate that the paper discusses those results and examines the conclusion and its implications.

DESCRIPTIVE ABSTRACTS

Description abstracts are usually much briefer than informative abstracts and provide much less information. Rather than summarizing the entire paper, a descriptive abstract functions more as a teaser, providing a quick overview that invites the reader to read the whole. Descriptive abstracts usually do not give or discuss results or set out the conclusion or its implications. A descriptive abstract of the boredom-proneness essay might simply include the first sentence from the informative abstract plus a final sentence of its own:

The relationship between boredom proneness and health-symptom reporting was examined. The findings and their application in clinical settings are discussed.

PROPOSAL ABSTRACTS

Proposal abstracts contain the same basic information as informative abstracts, but their purpose is very different. You prepare proposal abstracts to persuade someone to let you write on a topic, pursue a project, conduct an experiment, or present a paper at a scholarly conference. This kind of abstract is not written to introduce a longer piece but rather to stand alone, and often the abstract is written before the paper itself. Titles and other
aspects of the proposal deliberately reflect the theme of the proposed work, and you may use the future tense, rather than the past, to describe work not yet completed. Here is a possible proposal for doing research on boredom:

Undergraduate students will complete the Boredom Proneness Scale and the Hopkins Symptom Checklist. A multiple analysis of covariance will be performed to determine the relationship between boredom proneness total scores and ratings on the five subscales of the Hopkins Symptom Checklist (Obsessive–Compulsive, Somatization, Anxiety, Interpersonal Sensitivity, and Depression).

Key Features / Abstracts

A summary of basic information. An informative abstract includes enough information to substitute for the report itself, a descriptive abstract offers only enough information to let the audience decide whether to read further, and a proposal abstract gives an overview of the planned work.

Objective description. Abstracts present information on the contents of a report or a proposed study; they do not present arguments about or personal perspectives on those contents. The informative abstract on boredom proneness, for example, offers only a tentative conclusion: “The results suggest that boredom proneness may be an important element to consider.”

Brevity. Although the length of abstracts may vary, journals and organizations often restrict them to 120–200 words — meaning you must carefully select and edit your words.

A BRIEF GUIDE TO WRITING ABSTRACTS

Considering the Rhetorical Situation

PURPOSE Are you giving a brief but thorough overview of a completed study? only enough information to create interest? a proposal for a planned study or presentation?
For whom are you writing this abstract? What information about your project will your readers need?

Whatever your stance in the longer work, your abstract must be objective.

How will you set your abstract off from the rest of the text? If you are publishing it online, should it be on a separate page? What format do your readers expect?

**Generating Ideas and Text**

*Write the paper first, the abstract last.* You can then use the finished work as the guide for the abstract, which should follow the same basic structure. Exception: You may need to write a proposal abstract months before the work it describes will be complete.

*Copy and paste key statements.* If you've already written the work, highlight your THESIS, objective, or purpose; basic information on your methods; your results; and your conclusion. Copy and paste those sentences into a new document to create a rough version of your abstract.

*Pare down the rough abstract.* SUMMARIZE the key ideas in the document, editing out any nonessential words and details. In your first sentence, introduce the overall scope of your study. Also include any other information that seems crucial to understanding your paper. Avoid phrases that add unnecessary words, such as “It is concluded that.” In general, you probably won't want to use “I”; an abstract should cover ideas, not say what you think or will do.

*Conform to any requirements.* In general, an informative abstract should be at most 10 percent as long as the original and no longer than the maximum length allowed. Descriptive abstracts should be shorter still, and proposal abstracts should conform to the requirements of the organization calling for the proposal.
Ways of Organizing an Abstract

[An informative abstract]

State nature of study.

Summarize method of study.

Summarize results or findings of study.

Summarize discussion of results or findings.

State conclusions of study.

and/or

State implications of study.

[A descriptive abstract]

Announce subject of study.

Give brief overview of full paper.

[A proposal abstract]

Announce subject of study.

Summarize method to be used.

IF YOU NEED MORE HELP

See Chapter 28 for guidelines on DRAFTING, Chapter 29 on ASSESSING YOUR OWN WRITING, Chapter 30 on GETTING RESPONSE AND REVISIGN, and Chapter 31 on EDITING AND PROOFREADING.