Abstract: The purpose of an abstract is to provide a clear, succinct snapshot of your entire study or project, allowing readers to determine if they wish to invest further time learning more about it. This article provides general tips; suggestions specific to each section of a conference or journal abstract, its title, and key words; and a description of final details to be addressed prior to abstract submission. The goal is to maximize chances your abstract will be accepted. The article concludes with a brief overview of the abstract acceptance/rejection process.

KEY WORDS: abstracts, knowledge dissemination, publication components, writing

Your study or project is complete! The next step is to share your results with a wider audience, generally as a conference oral or poster presentation or as a journal article. Both of these typically require submission of an abstract. The purpose of an abstract is to provide a clear, succinct snapshot of your entire study or project, allowing readers to determine if they wish to invest further time learning more about it. Titles and abstracts are often the only portion of a journal article available free online (Oermann, 2014). Reviewers read abstracts to decide if your material is appropriate for their grant funding, conference, or journal. This article provides tips to assist you in submitting an optimal abstract to a journal or conference venue most likely to accept it.

GENERAL TIPS
It is important that the material you share aligns with the conference or journal theme or objectives. A query letter may be sent to a journal editor-in-chief to determine if your manuscript is appropriate for their readership. When a call for abstracts specifies the conference theme, it is important to clearly delineate in your abstract how your material aligns with that theme. One step in the submission process may be to select one or more categories in which your abstract fits. Accurate selection is important, as reviewers may be assigned abstracts based on their familiarity with the category.

Clearly summarize each section of your presentation in your abstract, as different aspects may be of particular interest to different readers. It should be immediately evident if your topic is of interest to a reader.

Submission instructions generally include author guidelines; follow them exactly! Guidelines for abstracts are likely to include details regarding word or character limitation (with or without spaces), sections to be included, structured or unstructured format, and (for a conference) the submission deadline. Reviewing abstracts from a recent journal issue or conference of the organization to which you plan to submit will provide insight into their expectations.

Conference Abstracts
Some considerations for submitting a conference abstract are irrelevant for journal submissions. The most important consideration is that if your abstract is selected and you accept the invitation, it is your professional obligation to attend, barring exceptional events. Prior to submitting a conference abstract, consider whether you will have the financial support to attend and means to produce a poster that meets conference specifications if your abstract is accepted (Sherman, 2011).

Submission of the same abstract to more than one conference is debatable. Some say it is acceptable unless conference submission instructions specify that previously presented information is not permitted (Sherman, 2011). Others recommend only doing so if changes are made, although only minor changes may be necessary (Haigh, 2006).

Conference syllabi often include abstracts of oral and poster presentations. Provide adequate information for attendees to know what to expect should they attend your presentation (Happell, 2007). Use a straightforward writing style in which complex concepts are
explained simply to attract a broader audience, particularly when English may not be their primary language (Coad & Devitt, 2006).

ABSTRACT FORMAT

Not all abstracts are structured. Those that are structured require specific sections that have become customary, although wording for section headings may differ depending on the article type and journal specifications (see Table 1). Questions addressed in an abstract are why, where, how, what, and what now?

Structured Abstracts

Why? The background or introduction consists of one or two sentences. Describe the knowledge gap your presentation addresses and why it is important. Clearly state the purpose, aims, or objectives of your presentation. This may consist of a single sentence concisey describing your topic, population, and main variables (Bliss, 2012). If yours is a research presentation, the study may have multiple aims. Depending on time or word limitations, you may only be able to clearly cover one or two major aims in a single oral presentation or journal article, respectively. Results from different study aims also may be of interest to different conference or journal reader populations; as mentioned previously, choose appropriately.

Where? This section may be called sample, setting, or population; it also may be incorporated into methods. Include key descriptors of your population, assessment tool(s), and dependent variables or outcomes.

How? Headings for this section generally include the word methods, possibly in conjunction with design, materials, or patients. For research abstracts, a few words of standard study design terminology (e.g., retrospective/prospective, longitudinal/cross-sectional, between subjects/within subjects, pretest/posttest) will convey a significant amount of information (Bliss, 2012). Describe procedure essentials with enough detail for readers to appreciate what and how they were implemented in approximately three sentences. Including how difficulties confronted were handled may help others hoping to implement a similar program (Happell, 2007); these difficulties may be described here or in the conclusions/discussion section. Data analysis description may be included here or in the results section.

What? Results are the most important section of your abstract (Alexandrov & Hennerici, 2007; Andrade, 2011). Precisely present your findings in three to five sentences. Describe only observed outcomes pertinent to aims included in your abstract. For quantitative studies, provide results in absolute numbers and percentages, with p values and confidence intervals as appropriate to allow readers to evaluate if your results are statistically (although not necessarily clinically) significant. Include a sentence describing pertinent setting and demographic data. In situations where data collection is not complete at the time of abstract submission, write that you will be presenting your findings-to-date rather than your final results (Happell, 2008). Data collection and analysis may require more time than anticipated!

What now? This section may be called conclusions or discussion. In one to three sentences (Bliss, 2012; Christensen, Kume & Autorino, 2009), concisely summarize why your specific findings are important and their clinical or professional implications, linking them to your purpose. Succinctly articulate the core message you want readers to retain; do not say that further research is needed (that is presumed) or exaggerate the significance of your findings. In clinical abstracts, sharing lessons learned may prevent readers from making similar mistakes should they attempt to implement your project.

Case Studies

Introduce a case study with general background information regarding the particular health condition. Then present your specific case with therapies utilized. What is it about this patient you want to share with...
others? In your discussion or conclusions section, compare your patient to those in the literature (if there are any) and communicate practice implications for others caring for similar patients.

Exclusions

There are several things to be excluded from an abstract. These include references, tables, and figures. Limit abbreviations unless they are universally recognized. If there is a series of repeated words you cannot avoid using, write out the words the first time with the abbreviation immediately following in parentheses.

ARTICLE TITLE

The first impression a reader has of your material is based on your title. You want those interested in your topic to immediately know they want to invest their time learning more about your study or project. Ensure that your title accurately communicates your main message. “Make the title dynamic and informative, rather than descriptive” (Alexandrov & Hennerici, 2007, p. 256). More interesting titles include study findings (Bliss, 2012; Bordage & McGaghie, 2001; Christensen et al., 2009). Make your title neither too long nor too short, with a maximum of 10–12 words recommended (Christensen et al., 2009). Use terminology familiar to peers and multidisciplinary readers; including Medical Subject Headings terms in the title will enhance chances of your published material being located via electronic searches (Christensen et al., 2009; Oermann & Leondarelli, 2013).

KEY WORDS

Another method by which electronic searches locate or categorize articles is key words, making your choices very important. Journal submissions generally require that authors include several key words, as do some conferences. For conferences with a theme, have at least one key word reflect that theme (Haigh, 2006). Strongly consider including Medical Subject Headings terminology as key words to enhance others locating your work; Suggestions for Authors may be found at http://www.nlm.nih.gov/mesh/authors.html

FINAL DETAILS PRIOR TO ABSTRACT SUBMISSION

Poor grammar or spelling errors immediately detract from your abstract, potentially causing readers to question the care with which your study or project was conducted. Spell check your abstract prior to requesting others to review it. Also allow yourself a couple of days away from your abstract before rereading and revising or condensing it. Then have a peer and someone outside your specialty, both of whom you trust, to provide honest feedback and review your abstract for content clarity, grammar, and appropriate word usage. Spell checking only confirms that a word is correctly spelled, not that you have used the correct word (e.g., their vs. there). You will likely revise your abstract several times, including in your response to comments from your reviewers. Be sure all authors listed have read and agree to the final version of your abstract (Coad & Devitt, 2006). Spell check it again just before submission.

Word has a feature that provides word and character counts (with and without spaces). If you are unfamiliar with this feature, click on the Word help icon and enter word count in the search box. Directions for this feature in your version of Word will appear. Be sure your abstract does not exceed the word or character limitation specified! Electronic submissions may reject your entire abstract or cut it off when the limit is reached.

You may face technical difficulties when attempting an electronic submission. One suggestion is to start your submission early by inputting only author-related information. This will allow you to visualize all the sections required by the database and provide ample time to contact the organization should you have technical questions (Bliss, 2012).

Be sure to keep electronic and print copies of your submission! If you submit electronically and are given the opportunity, download a portable document format (PDF) version of your entire submission. If yours is a poster or presentation abstract, use the abstract as an outline for your poster or presentation and when writing the related article. You have invested a significant amount of time and effort in your study or project. Writing an article will ensure a wider audience and permanent existence in the published literature.

ACCEPTANCE/REJECTION PROCESS

After submission, your abstract will be reviewed by a conference program director or journal editor. If she or he decides it coincides with the conference or journal objectives, it will be sent with guidelines to reviewers who have topic expertise. Conference call-for-abstracts may include these guidelines; keep them in mind when writing your abstract.

If your abstract is not accepted, reviewer comments will likely be sent with the rejection notification. After overcoming your initial disappointment, carefully read their comments. Most reviewers intend their feedback to be constructive; consider the comments a learning opportunity.
CONCLUSION

“The creation of a successful abstract does not rest solely upon…pragmatic techniques. It requires a sound topic, a ‘wow’ factor (if possible), a large measure of luck and fundamentally and most important good writing skills” (Haigh, 2006, p. 357). I hope this article will help you write abstracts accepted by journals and conference organizations, thereby disseminating your valuable and practical study or project findings.

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References