

Writing an Abstract

The abstract is central to knowledge-making in academic discourse: it provides a brief, accurate synopsis of the study. In part, this brief text-type achieves its stature because researchers read the abstract to determine if they will read the study itself (Bhatia, 1993; Hyland, 2013; Tankó, 2017).

This writing resource employs the Create a Research Space (CARS) heuristic (Swales, 1990) and adapts it for writing an abstract. This versatile, malleable, and dynamic model helps solve the problem of *what* an abstract achieves and *how*. For more on the CARS Model and the 3 “moves,” see the accompanying writing guide [Research Article Introductions](#). For those in STEM disciplines, see the IMRaD model adapted for abstracts in [Research Article Abstracts in English](#).

Note that in this adapted version, CARS Moves 1 and 3 are *obligatory*, while CARS Move 2 is *optional*. To posit a Move as *obligatory* means that writers of abstracts understand they have an obligation to readers to provide relevant context for the research story (in Move 1) and they must address the significance of the contribution (in Move 1 and/or Move 3). Whereas, to posit a Move as *optional* means that academic writers understand they have stylistic choices to make—disciplinary and authorial. These stylistic choices help determine whether or not a text achieves cohesion (at the sentence level) and coherence (at the ideational level) for readers.

Situate the Research Story: Summarize the Conversation **(CARS Move 1)**

(Obligatory)

Writing Exercise 1

Write 1 – 2 sentences that provide readers with the narrative trajectory for the research story: background context; purpose; centrality claim; literature review. What story are you telling and for whom? Use full citation practices according to disciplinary conventions: in your discipline, is it typical to include citations in an abstract? What about the target journal?

Identify the Research Space: Listen for the Silence **(CARS Move 2)**

(Optional)

Writing Exercise 2

Write 1 sentence that identifies the uninhabited research space your study addresses. Depending on your discipline and study design, this could be a research-world or a real-world problem. You may want to borrow one of the following terms to describe the research space: *gap*, *problem*, or *need*. And you may choose to signal the research space at the start of the sentence: *however*, *despite*, *although*, *yet*, *but*, *nevertheless*, *nonetheless*, *while*.

Inhabit the Research Space: Join the Conversation **(CARS Move 3)**

(Obligatory)

Writing Exercise 3

Write 1 – 2 sentences that state the primary aim, goal, or objective of your study. Then, follow that statement with 1 sentence that states the significance or addresses the implications of your contribution. Next, write 1 or 2 sentences that describe the methodology/study design: data; participants; site/location; qualitative or quantitative methods.

Construct a Cohesive Text: Stitch the Text Together (Obligatory)

Writing Exercise 4

Bring together the writing from Exercises 1 – 3 to form a cohesive text (at the sentence level) and a coherent research story (at the ideational level): the abstract. Stitch them together in a way that seamlessly engages readers in the research narrative. This may involve some rewriting, some reordering, and some additional storytelling. At the sentence-level, focus on *transitions*, *repetition* of key terms, *definitions* for key terms, and the elimination and/or translation of *jargon*.

To Jargon or Not to Jargon

Martínez & Mammola (2021) investigated the relationship between the use of jargon and a research article's success (measured in citation counts), and found that articles whose titles and abstracts had high rates of jargon received fewer citations. Since we all want to be read and cited by others, this finding seems significant and probably worth paying attention to.

Narrative Style

Research on jargon in abstracts (e.g., technical language; discipline-specific terminology) shows that writing style matters, particularly when writing a grant proposal abstract (Markowitz, 2019). Markowitz (2019) found that grant proposal abstracts with complex, analytic thinking but little jargon *and* a narrative style received more funding from the National Science Foundation (NSF). Markowitz (2019) describes the features of a narrative or storytelling style as consisting of high rates of adverbs, conjunctions, and pronouns.

References

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