

**Webinar Series: The Ultimate Guide
to Publishing Research in Top Journals
(Episodes 1-6, 2021–2022)**



Hosted by Thai Association for Applied Linguistics

Episode 5. Abstract Writing



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What is an abstract?

- “A short written statement that contains the most important details of a longer piece of writing such as a newspaper article, a report, or a speech”;
- a 100–250 word standalone text;
- expresses the centrality/focus of your work;
- answers why, how, what, so what?
- Individual journals may have unique requirements. So always check the author guidelines

Longman. (n.d.). Abstract. *In Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English Online*. Retrieved October 21, 2021, from <https://www.ldoceonline.com/dictionary/abstract>



APA guidelines:

The abstract addresses the following (usually 1–2 sentences per topic):

- key aspects of the literature review
- problem under investigation or research question(s)
- clearly stated hypothesis or hypotheses
- methods used (including brief descriptions of the study design, sample, and sample size)
- study results
- implications (i.e., why this study is important, applications of the results or findings)

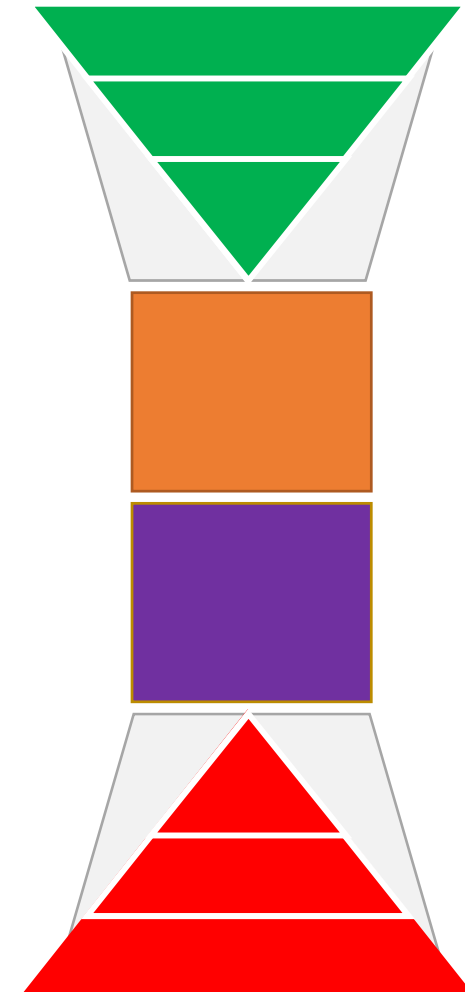
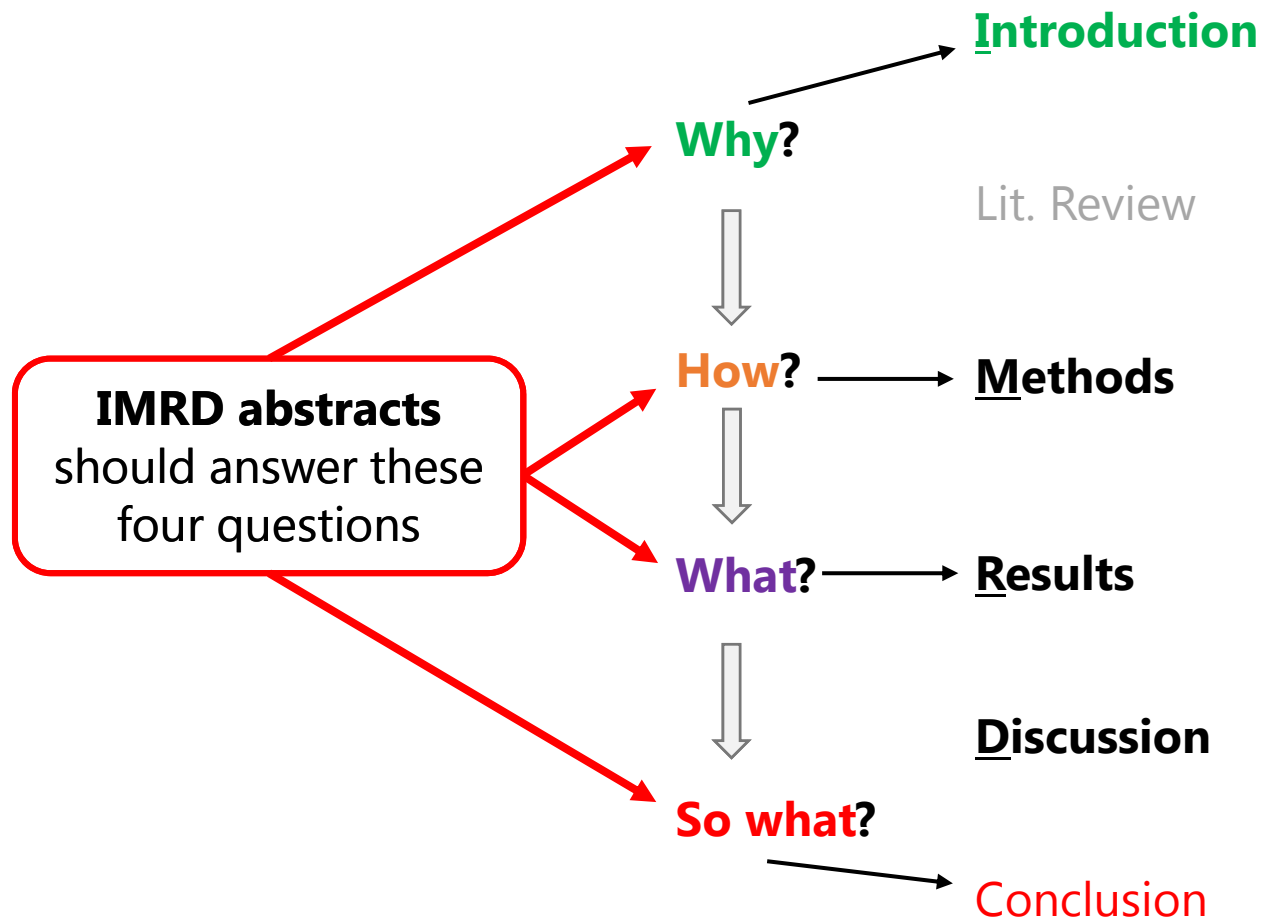


Two main goals of an abstract

- help a reader to decide if the paper is worth reading
- summarise the paper clearly and concisely



Reminder of IMRD structure





How do we achieve this goal?

Describe clearly and concisely; do not evaluate or defend the paper.
Give four key pieces of information:

- a brief, precise statement of the problem or issue (**why?**);
- a description of the research method and design (**how?**);
- major findings in simple terms (**what?**);
- implications and/or applications of the paper (**so what?**);

Abstract should also facilitate database searching—be sure to include important key words referring to method and content.



Structuring an abstract

Typically, an IMRD abstract is 100–250 words.

We can divide our word limit according to the importance of each element (why, how, what, so what?).

Rough guide (*but alter these depending on your needs*):

- 25% of the space on the purpose and importance of the research (Introduction; **why?**)
- 25% of the space on what you did (Methods; **how?**)
- 35% of the space on what you found (Results; **what?**)
- 15% of the space on the implications of the research (**so what?**)



Example purpose statements

Purpose statement (the **why**) from a 200-word abstract:

The field of language learning strategies (LLS) has grown significantly, experiencing many twists and turns over the years. Consequently, this study takes stock of, and reports on, definitional and conceptual changes—because how we define a concept can greatly affect its impact on teaching and research.

***46 words** (app. 25%)

***Not “This paper aims to”** – this suggests that you are not sure if you actually “hit your target” or not (i.e., you are still “aiming” at something).

Thomas, N., Bowen, N. E. J. A., & Rose, H. (2021). A diachronic analysis of explicit definitions and implicit conceptualizations of language learning strategies. *System*, 103, 102619.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2021.102619>



Example method statements

Method statement (the **how**) from a 200-word abstract:

We collected 461 journal articles from prominent indexes and divided them into three periods marked by major developments in the field: 1975–1990, 1991–2005, and 2006–2019. We then used content analysis to categorize, code, and explore explicit definitions found in the articles and various corpus-based techniques on the full texts to investigate implicit conceptualizations of LLS within and across these periods.

***63 words** (slightly more than 25% because **selling the method is important** in this paper)

*Also note the active voice (as recommended in APA 7th ed.)

Thomas, N., Bowen, N. E. J. A., & Rose, H. (2021). A diachronic analysis of explicit definitions and implicit conceptualizations of language learning strategies. *System*, *103*, 102619.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2021.102619>



Example result statements

Results statement (the **what?**) from a 200-word abstract:

The findings indicate that elements of self-directedness (e.g., self-regulation, agency, and autonomy) are increasingly prevalent in researchers' conceptualizations over time. The findings also highlight trends in language related to self-directedness, especially in the way strategies are portrayed to be operationalized by learners and in their intended purpose(s).

***47 words** – substantially less than 65% (70 words) because we had to **sell (a) the Methods (how?) and (b) the Implications (so what?)**

*Also note the active voice (as recommended in APA 7th ed.)

Thomas, N., Bowen, N. E. J. A., & Rose, H. (2021). A diachronic analysis of explicit definitions and implicit conceptualizations of language learning strategies. *System*, *103*, 102619. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2021.102619>

Example implication statement

Implications (the **so what**) from a 200-word abstract:

Based on our findings, we argue for a change in thinking—from the ideal to the actual—in LLS conceptualizations, and call for reconceptualized roles of teachers and students that are more representative of and compatible with instructed language learning contexts.

***41 words** – more than the recommended 15% (30 words) because the significance of the paper may not be obvious at first glance

*Again, note the active voice (as recommended in APA 7th ed.)

Thomas, N., Bowen, N. E. J. A., & Rose, H. (2021). A diachronic analysis of explicit definitions and implicit conceptualizations of language learning strategies. *System*, *103*, 102619.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2021.102619>



Breakout room task 1



Task 1. Recognising the component parts of IMRD abstracts (*i.e.*, *"rhetorical moves" / statements addressing the 4 key questions*)

In the Word document emailed to you and sent in the chat at the start of this episode, there are several breakout room tasks.

Instructions:

1. In the document, you will find some example sentences from three abstracts I have written (some are published; some are under review);
2. In your breakout rooms, identify what question each statement is answering and move it to the correct position for an abstract;
3. Make a note of the word count of each "move".



Breakout Answers



Paper 1 = (c), (a), (d), (b)

Paper 2 = (b), (d), (a), (c)

Paper 3 = (c), (a), (b), (d) – there is no “**so what**” in this abstract because the “highlights” cover this. More on “highlights” later on...

**Some common
problems in
IMRD abstracts**





Common problem #1

The abstract provides a statement of what the paper will ask or explore rather than what it found:

X This report examines the causes of oversleeping –

OK, but what did it find out about these causes?

✓ Results show that individuals oversleep because they go to bed too late, forget to set their alarms, and keep their rooms dark.



Common problem #2

The abstract provides general categories rather than specific details in the findings:

X The study draws conclusions about which variables are most important in choosing a movie theatre.

OK, but what, specifically, are these variables?

✓ The study concludes that the most important variables in choosing a movie theatre are comfortable seats and high-quality popcorn.



Common problem #3

The abstract includes filler words and/or obscure jargon:

X Processes of an identity “becoming” can be seen as drawing and reflecting upon an individual’s structured spaces in terms of organizing/accruing capital (Bourdieu, 1982) and the discursive production of self (Davies & Harré, 1990).

individual’s structured spaces?

discursive production of self?

✓ With regard to identity, individuals have varying levels of control over how they are positioned in society and institutions, and the ways in which these positions are legitimised.



Common problem #4

The abstract includes citations:

With regard to identity, individuals have varying levels of control over how they are positioned in society and institutions (Davies & Harré, 1990), and the ways in which these positions are legitimised (Bourdieu, 1982).

- The purpose of the abstract is to sell YOUR work (your original contributions), so avoid discussing others' work;
- Your purpose statement may make reference scholarly background to situate your research and show how it fits in, but there's no need to mention specific publications;
- The exception to this is if you are responding directly to another paper or replicating it;

***Remember, the abstract should be self-contained and fully understandable without reference to other sources.**



Breakout room task 2



Task 2. Evaluating an Abstract

Instructions:

1. In the document, you will find an example abstract (one that I made up for this talk);
2. In your breakout rooms, discuss the positive and negative aspects of this abstract.
3. Make suggestions on how it could be improved.



Breakout Answers



Some brief notes on the negative aspects:

- Too short at 116 words (called for a 200-word abstract)
- First sentence was too verbose at 41 words long; also contained a citation, and three abbreviations.
- Second sentence used “Therefore”. This was a non-sequitur as there was no causal link between these sentence 1 and sentence 2.
- No mention of no. of participants, data collection method, etc.
- Too much terminology and more citations
- “The findings are presented and discussed” – oh really? *rolls eyes!
- Last two sentences are also pointless—they have no propositional value

**Some useful
techniques we can
use to navigate
abstract writing**





Tips to write an abstract

Writing a purpose statement (the **why**):

- Answer the question "*what's the topic?*" in one sentence;
- Answer the questions "*why is this topic important?*" And "*why is my research paper needed?*"
- Turn the answers from these questions into two simple sentences written in the active voice;
- Extend or shorten these sentences according to (a) the abstract's word limit (aim for 25%), and (b) the relative importance of the "why?" in selling your paper.

In most cases, you can assume that your readers know the field and thus move straight into your specific topic when writing the purpose statement.



Tips on building an abstract

Writing a purpose statement (the **why**):

If you have difficulty doing this step, then (re)consider the following:

Write down your central research question:

- This is the single most important point for writing your paper and thus any kind of abstract;
- An obscure or very complicated research question is a warning sign in any part of research (look at your title... is it full of jargon and long-winded phrases).

Identify your gap:

- Summarise why you think your research question has not been adequately answered in previous research.



Tips on building an abstract

Writing the method statement (the **how**):

- Describe **how** you addressed your research question.
- This may be both a new idea and the methods used may be novel.
- If a chain of methods was used, focus on the key steps.
- Give sample size – readers want to know how much data you analysed.
 - This can be participant numbers, length of recordings, size of corpus, etc.
- Extend or shorten your sentences according to (a) the abstract's word limit (aim for 25%), and (b) the relative importance of the "why?" in selling your paper.



Tips on building an abstract

Writing the results statement (the **what**) :

- Summarise each of your key findings in one 10–14 word sentence that contains one verb, is not a title, and is not a question;
- If you find this hard, your results may be too diverse or your research question too broad;
- Extend or shorten your sentences according to (a) the abstract's word limit (aim for 35%), and (b) the relative importance of each result in selling your paper (and upcoming implications);
- Don't include complicated statistics in your abstract—just say if something was significant or not and at what level (e.g., $p < .01$)



Tips on building an abstract

Writing the implications statement (the “so what”):

- If you have written your paper correctly, the implications will be explicitly stated in your concluding paragraphs;
- **The “so what?” question** means looking at the interpretations (claims about results) you have made and asking yourself *“So what? Who would care about this interpretation and why?”*
- Formulate specific “so what” questions;
 - E.g., “How does my interpretation enrich the field’s understanding of Y? – where “Y” can be framed in terms of innovations in theory, method, pedagogical practices, and so on...”
- i.e., have you furthered theory, suggested a new method, given directions for future teaching practices, solved a problem, etc.?



Breakout room task 3



Task 3. Writing an IMRD abstract

Instructions:

1. Document (2) is an example paper (currently under review with a Q1 journal);
2. I have highlighted key aspects (in yellow) that can be used to construct an abstract. Namely answers to the **why, how, what, and so what** questions;
3. Use this material to write a rough draft of a 200-word abstract (perhaps break the task up so that one person does the "why", another does the "how", and so on...);
4. Use the guidelines given to you earlier for how many words to give each statement/move (i.e., 25%→25%→35%→15%)

My 200-word abstract

Ensuring adequate inclusivity in educational materials is a matter of ethics and fairness, as well as a means to maximize learning processes. Yet, over the last thirty years, research has continually shown that English language learning textbooks present material that favors the representation of Whites over other races. **[purpose / why?]** To investigate if this is still the case, we explore inclusivity of race with regard to 1648 image participants found in five popular textbooks. We investigate frequency of occurrence, physical presence (size on page), and projected social relationship between viewer and image participant, drawing on a social semiotic framework for the latter. **[method / how?]** Results show that the presence of race is (still) heavily skewed toward Whites, both in terms of overall numbers and spatial affordance. Results also show considerable variation across the textbooks quantitatively and qualitatively with regard to racial representation. Nevertheless, there is some regularity with regard to certain image types, which appear to reflect the books' pedagogical foci. **[results / what?]** Based on these findings and others, we argue for a change in thinking—from the ideal to the practical—and for textbook producers to finally stand up and make substantive changes to how they represent race in imagery, both quantitatively and qualitatively. **[implications / so what?]**



Keywords

- Keywords need to be descriptive and capture the most important aspects of your paper.
- They are used for indexing in databases and as search terms for readers.
- Include three to five words, phrases, or acronyms as keywords – **do not repeat what you have in the title.**
- Keywords address essential paper elements, such as the following:
 - research topic
 - Population
 - Method
 - application of results or findings



Keywords

Written one line below the abstract

- **label:** "Keywords:"
 - indented (like a regular paragraph)^o
 - italic (but not bold)
- **text:** written on the same line as and one space after the label
 - lowercased (but capitalize proper nouns)
 - not italic or bold
 - each keyword separated by a comma and a space
 - no ending punctuation after the final keyword^o listed in any order (not necessarily alphabetical)



Highlights

- Highlights are three to five bullet points that help increase the discoverability of your article via search engines.
- These bullet points should capture the novel results of your research as well as new methods that were used during the study (if any).
- Think of them as the "elevator pitch" of your article.
- Please include terms that you know your readers will be looking for online.
- Don't try to capture all ideas, concepts or conclusions as highlights are meant to be short: 85 characters or fewer, including spaces.



Highlights

- Not part of editorial consideration and aren't required until the final files stage
- Only required for full research articles
- Must be provided as a separate Word document
- No jargon, acronyms, or abbreviations: aim for a general audience and use keywords
- Consider the reader - Highlights are the first thing they'll see



Example Highlights

Highlights from an article I have published in *Teacher and Teaching Education*:

- Explores the identities, positions, and investments of six English language teachers in an internationalised department
- Advances a method for exploring identity agency that considers legitimisation from an ecological perspective
- Investigates context-culture-specific emotional discourses in language teachers as they strive for ethical self-formations
- Shows how teachers can legitimise preferred positions through investments that reflect their level of agency
- Illustrates the contrasting approaches of experienced teachers, who perform similar roles through varying means/codes

Bowen et al. (2021). Legitimising teacher identity: Investment and agency from an ecological perspective. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 108. 103519. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2021.103519>

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Outline

Highlights

Abstract

Keywords

1. Introduction

2. Teacher identity, investment, and agency

3. Method

4. Findings

5. Discussion

6. Conclusion

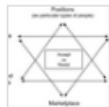
Funding

Declaration of competing interest



References

Show full outline

Figures (1)



Tables (4)

-  Table 1
-  Table 2
-  Table 3
-  Table 4



Teaching and Teacher Education

Volume 108, December 2021, 103519




Research paper

Legitimising teacher identity: Investment and agency from an ecological perspective

Neil Evan Jon Anthony Bowen ^a, , Natakorn Satienchayakorn ^b, , Mareeyadar Teedaaksomsakul ^c, , Nathan Thomas ^d 

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2021.103519>

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Highlights

- Explores the identities, positions, and investments of six English language teachers in an internationalised department.
- Advances a method for exploring identity agency that considers legitimisation from an ecological perspective.
- Investigates context-culture-specific emotional discourses in language teachers as they strive for ethical self-formations.
- Shows how teachers can legitimise preferred positions through investments that reflect their level of agency.
- Illustrates the contrasting approaches of experienced teachers, who perform similar roles through varying means/codes.

Abstract

International higher-education systems position teachers in ways that require an

Recommended articles

Teachers' emotional labor in response to daily events with indiv...
Teaching and Teacher Education, Volume 107, 2021, Ar...

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Contradictions and Critical Praxis in Foreign Language Teachers'...
Teaching and Teacher Education, Volume 108, 2021, Ar...

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