

WRITING AN ABSTRACT FOR YOUR GRADUATE THESIS

What is an abstract?

Simply put, an abstract is a concise, to-the-point summary of a longer document. Abstracts are used for many purposes in the academic/ research world: they are commonly expected for conference proceedings or proposals, journal articles, grant proposals, and, most importantly for you, for thesis submissions.

Abstracts typically have very strict word limits: some journals or conferences have limits as low as 50 words. For Emily Carr thesis submissions, the word limit for abstracts is 350 words.

Why do we write abstracts?

An abstract can serve at least two related but separate purposes for readers and researchers:

- it can act as a preview for readers, helping them prepare for what they will read in the full document;
- it can act as a filter, helping researchers determine whether the full document will help them in their own research.

How is an abstract different from an introduction?

While abstracts and introductions share some similarities—they both come at the beginning of your document, for example—an abstract, unlike an introduction, should be able to function independently from the rest of your document.

An introduction is designed to bring your reader into or introduce the rest of your document. In contrast, your abstract is a miniature synopsis or summary of your whole document. So it reveals not just where you start, as an introduction does, but also where you finish and the steps between.

What should I include in an abstract?

The main challenge of writing an abstract is similar to that of writing any summary: deciding which ideas to include and which to leave out. An abstract should include the key terms and main ideas in the thesis, your primary methods of investigation (or how you've conducted your research), and any conclusions you have drawn from your research. Any major section or idea in your thesis probably merits a mention and some description in your abstract.

Some sections commonly included in an abstract:

- a general introduction to your field of research
- a statement of your specific research questions or topics
- a summary of your methods and methodology (what you did and how you did it)
- the results of your research (what you made and/or discovered)
- any conclusions you have drawn about the significance or relevance of your results and/or future directions for this research

In many databases, the abstract is the only searchable text of a document, so it is important that your abstract contain the important keywords or search terms of your thesis (though in many cases you may be asked to submit a separate list of keywords).

According to Emily Carr thesis submission guidelines, your abstract should contain no tables, graphs or images.

What makes a good abstract?

A good abstract mirrors the tone, style and content of your paper. While it *can* function as a standalone document, the abstract is more often read as part of your thesis and so needs to accurately reflect the rest of your document.

Anyone reading your abstract should have a good idea of what to expect from the rest of your thesis.

It should also be succinct.

When should I write an abstract?

Though it comes at the beginning of your document, ironically the abstract is one of the last things you will write. Because an abstract covers the entire argument of your thesis, you'll want to write the abstract after you have a relatively strong, complete draft. You can even wait until you have almost finished your final draft.

But leave yourself time to write the abstract. Its short length is deceiving: even very experienced writers often need many drafts to represent all of their main ideas within the tight word limit.

Examples:

As food systems have become industrialized, information about food production has been obscured, causing threats to food security. Local food systems provide an alternative, and consumers and producers are increasingly using them. However, local food systems present their own challenges. Employing participatory research methods, including contextual conversations with producers and diary studies with consumers, this thesis explores the design of the Community Foods service which allows consumers to more easily connect and communicate with producers. As part of the service, I propose a greater involvement of locally-owned stores in food systems as they increase access to local foods without increasing the time required from producers. The main aspect of the Community Foods service is a digital platform that allows consumers to explore and search the local food opportunities across stores, markets, and individual producers within a community. Through these methods, the Community Foods service provides greater access to local foods, proposing new connections within a community and ultimately new ways of moving through it based on food.

– Michael Peterson, MDes 2015

What does this abstract tell us?

From the formal tone and diction of this abstract, we know that the tone of the thesis is academic and in line with the expectations of social science writing. The researcher uses various kinds of research to explore his ideas rather than personal or creative reflection.

Notice also that despite the formal tone, the author still uses “I” when discussing his work.

Structure

- Because of its formal, academic tone, this abstract has a very straightforward structure that narrows from general to specific.
- sentence one introduces the broad topic: food systems.
- sentence two and three introduce the more specific field that the thesis will explore: local food systems and communication.
- sentence four introduces the specific problem addressed in the thesis: design of the Community Foods service. It also introduces the methods the thesis uses to address those problems: contextual conversations with producers and diary studies with consumers.
- sentence five proposes a broad solution to the specific problem: increase communication without increasing time.
- sentence six offers a specific method for achieving that solution: a digital platform.
- sentence seven sums everything up and puts a neat little bow on it.

An exploration of dreams is a recurring source of inspiration for my practice. Coupled with observations from lived, waking experience, dreams offer another layer and resource for making art. Inspired by my dreams the balloon is used as a material to explore the entanglement between waking life and the dream, between multifarious vantage points within the reality of everyday experience. I address some of the history of weather balloon as a scientific object and contemporary artists that use this artifact in their own art practices. The dream is embraced as an artist tool as is the cell phone. Aspects of contemporary thinking on objects informs the processed based research namely object-oriented ontology and vibrant matter. Some understanding of how relational aspects are privileged in vibrant matter start to emerge. Throughout this thesis I explore material practices in relation to new technology namely the weather balloon and the smartphone. In addition to philosophical ideas on objects, I investigate this through theoretical constructs on improvisation to develop bridging strategies to explain how the body reacts and responds to the beautiful agency and power of objects.

– prOphecy sun, MAA 2015

What does this abstract tell us?

From the imagistic language (“beautiful agency”, “entanglement between waking life and the dream”) and frequent use of first person pronouns (I and my), we can tell that the tone of this thesis is creative and personal rather than academic.

The writer focuses on her artistic practice in this thesis, but she also touches on some research in the fields of object-oriented ontology and the history of the weather balloon. This aspect of her thesis might be of interest to future researchers and therefore appears in her abstract.

Keywords

Although the structure and style are less straightforward than the previous example, the writer is still careful to include all the key terms a researcher might look for. These key terms include “object-oriented ontology,” “vibrant matter,” “weather balloon,” and “cell phone as an artist tool.”

More Information:

The University of Toronto Writing site:

<http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/specific-types-of-writing/abstract>

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill’s Writing Center:

<http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/abstracts/>

For a non-academic perspective on abstract-writing, visit this blog:

<http://www.easterbrook.ca/steve/2010/01/how-to-write-a-scientific-abstract-in-six-easy-steps/>

(NB: The advice here is excellent: the suggestion to write your abstract in six sentences, however, will not work for your thesis abstract!)