

Special Editorial

The Three Foundations of a Good Abstract: Content, Conciseness, and Simplicity

Kent D. Hamilton, BS, MA Ed, JD¹

The abstracts we write for our articles are a bit different than most other types of writing we do. Although they are the first thing a reader sees when they look at our articles, they are generally the last thing we write, and, in my opinion, they can be the most difficult part of a manuscript to write. Additionally, each one is unique, related only to that paper, its contents, what the reader needs to know about the article to decide if it is relevant, and the author(s) styles. Even experienced writers who are native English speakers (NES) often find it difficult to write article abstracts well. In the next few pages, I will discuss what I see as the three foundations, content, conciseness, and simplicity, that a good abstract is built upon. However, let's take a look at why abstracts are important and why writing them is so troublesome to begin with.

Why is having a good abstract important?

Simply put, you must have a good abstract because that is often the only part of your article that gets read, especially by researchers and students looking for articles related to a specific topic. If your abstract is poorly written, does not contain key words or concepts, or cannot communicate your articles' concepts and content to the reader clearly, they will simply move on to the next article on the list. More than once, I have almost passed over an article because of a poorly written abstract, but something "told" me to go ahead and read it, and I ended up finding really good, relevant, usable information in the article.

When researchers and students do literature searches on modern day electronic databases, their search for articles on a topic will turn up a huge number of possible matches, hundreds, even thousands, depending on the popularity of the topic. The results of the search generally contain the basic information about the article, such as the title, the author(s), where and when it was published and the abstract. There is often no way for them to read each and every one of the articles, so, they only read the abstracts looking for key terms or concepts related to their topic of interest. If the terms or concepts they are looking for are not included in the abstract, they quickly move on to the next one.

¹ Lecturer, Faculty of Liberal Arts, Ubon Ratchathani University

Another issue related to this is that many articles are on “pay to play” sites that only allow free access to the article abstracts. In other words, they are published by journals or on sites where you must either have a subscription to that journal / site, or pay a per article fee for access to the whole article. Unless the person performing the search has access to the journal or website through a personal or school subscription, the cost of downloading multiple articles can be a problem. So, if they abstract does not clearly indicate that what they are looking for is contained in the article, they will move along to the next article.

Additionally, how the abstract is written, including its organization, grammar, wording, and flow, effect the readers’ perception of the authors and the potential quality of their research. An abstract that is filled with grammatical errors, things that are poorly or confusingly worded, moves randomly from topic to topic, will similarly be dismissed the researcher or student will likely quickly move on to the next article on the printout. Ultimately, having a well written abstract is important for your article to get noticed, read, and, hopefully, cited in other works. For this to happen it must contain the correct content that is presented in a concise, comprehensible manner that will grab the attention of readers doing a literature search.

So, why is it so hard to write an abstract?

Well, there are several factors that play a part in this. Many of the toughest ones to deal with are related to the very limited number of words we are allowed to use. This means we have to carefully consider what content we must include, versus what we want to include, and how to be as concise as possible with how we communicate it. This also means we have to decide what we will leave out of the abstract, which is often far more difficult to decide.

We, as authors, tend to be proud of our research and writing and want to share it with the world. We know the content and value of our research and writing more intimately than anyone else. However, most journals limit the number of words, which is where our problems begin. Although the actual number varies, most journals limit abstracts to around 250 or 300 words. I have seen limits as low as 150 words in some journals and for some conference guides. Conveying the meaning and content of a research article in 300 words or less is extremely difficult. Often, authors have a difficult time keeping the article under 6000, or even 7000 words. In the abstract, authors are asked to convey essence of everything on that article in about 5% of the space.

Doing this is hard enough for an NES. If an author is a non-native English speaker (NNES), the difficulty is amplified. In addition to facing all of the obstacles that NESs face, NNESs have additional

issues they must contend with. While understanding the denotative (dictionary) meanings of words is relatively easy, understanding their connotative meanings, which are more related to cultural and circumstantial issues, have a huge influence on how NESs choose to express an idea or concept and are far more difficult for many NNEs to grasp. This often leads to messages being expressed in a manner that communicating a slightly, or even very, different message than was intended. Similar issues arise from the syntax (the order words and phrases are placed within a sentence) used when an author's native language, or first language (L1) uses different conventions than English. This frequently makes things vague, or difficult for readers to follow.

The Three Foundations: Content, Conciseness, and Simplicity

These three concepts are so entwined and tightly woven together, it is impossible to discuss them separately. So, I am not going to try to do that. Instead, we will discuss them in all their messy glory since that is how we will have to deal with them when we are writing.

The **content** in an abstract can be broken down into two categories: mandatory and optional content. **Mandatory content** includes the things that must be included in an abstract, such as the style of a study, its underpinning approaches and theories, the topic of interest, the study population, the study site (location), and the outcomes of the research and their importance. **Optional content** is anything else we want to include to provide the reader with a deeper, broader, or more meaningful understanding of the contents of the article. In order to include all the mandatory content and as much of the optional content that we can, we have to be very concise with how we communicate it to the reader. In other words, we have to use the minimum number of words to clearly and accurately communicate our message.

Mandatory content generally takes the majority of the wordcount we have available for the abstract and follows the same progression as our article. This means we generally start out by telling the reader what our research is about, why it is important, the outcomes, and, finally, our findings and why/how they are important to the field. Other things that are frequently included are the style of study, the theoretical underpinnings (if any) to our methods, and the data collection and analysis methods, especially when it is a mixed-methods, qualitative, quantitative study. Other types of studies, like case studies, retrospectives, or literature reviews, often omit this, but it really should always be included if there is sufficient word count. This really leaves precious little room for much of anything else.

Because there is so much of it, how we communicate the mandatory content has to be done very efficiently and we have to be very economical with our words. Which is simply another way of saying we have to be very concise with how we express them. This means we eliminate any excessive

wordiness, or at least as much as possible, without having a negative effect on how clearly our message is communicated to the reader. If we can communicate a message clearly and correctly with only two or three words instead of using five or six, then we should use the shorter wording.

Abstract 1

All hospitals recognize the importance of high alert drug (HAD) administration practice guidelines for medication safety. Nurses play an important role in the administration of these drugs, particularly with regard to administering the drugs, monitoring and recording the effects of the treatments, and monitoring for adverse reactions when these medications are administered incorrectly. This article aims to present the nurse's role in ensuring patient safety during HAD administration. The contents address the following 4 topics: 1) the definition of HAD; 2) the process of HAD administration; 3) the nurse's role in HAD administration; and 4) nursing care plans for patients receiving HAD treatments. This article benefits healthcare facilities by providing guidance to develop and improve their HAD administration systems for ensuring the safety of both their clients and healthcare personnel. (Doommai, Chiaranai, & Hamilton, 2021, p. 228)

One way to help keep the content and how we communicate it clear and concise is to keep things simple. **Simplicity** is a great concept as it helps us avoid unnecessary clutter and keep things clear and easy to understand. We all like using those big words we spent years in school and at work learning. They sound impressive and, if the other person understands them, they can convey a great deal of information. However, are they the best, most concise and simple, way to communicate something? The answer is maybe, or maybe not. Look at **Abstract 1**, above. Notice how it flows and how everything is stated very concisely, but it is clear and fully communicates all the important information about the article. Although the authors chose not to expressly state that this was a literature review, the abstract is still very strong, providing the reader with all the information needed to determine if the article is interesting or relevant to them. Everything needed for a reader to understand what they will find in the article is included in clear, simple, easy to understand language. Another good thing is the authors used an acronym to save word count.

In research writing we cannot assume that our readers know specialized terms or words with a special meaning in a specific field of endeavor (jargon), thus, we need to define them when we use them. We can do that in a parenthetical, like I just used to define jargon, or in another sentence. Once we have defined the term, we can use it freely and don't have to worry with defining it repeatedly. In the body of the article, doing that is not much of a problem, but, in a 300-word abstract, it uses up valuable

wordcount. However, sometimes it is better to use a little of your valuable wordcount to save more words later on, this is where acronyms come in to the picture. In **Abstract 1**, the authors are presenting information about “high alert drugs” (drugs that can be dangerous to a patient) and need to use this term several times in the abstract. The first time they use the phrase, they define an acronym, a word that is made up of letters from other words and is used to replace them in a text, in this case HAD for “High Alert Drugs”. After that, they simply use the acronym, saving them a dozen words that they could use for other things, if needed.

Abstract 2

Critically-ill surgical patients are at risk for developing pressure injuries. This retrospective, case-control design study was aimed to explore predictive and protective factors associated with the occurrence of pressure injuries among critically-ill surgical patients. The data of 285 critically-ill surgical patients were collected between 2015 and 2020 in a hospital in Ubon Ratchathani Province, Thailand. They were purposively recruited based on having ($n = 95$), or not having ($n = 190$), a pressure injury. The data were collected using the Factors Related to the Occurrence of Pressure Injury Record Form. The instrument’s content validity was approved by three clinical experts and its content validity index was 1.0. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and multiple logistic regressions. Results showed that most of the participants were male (61.8%) with an average age of 65.83 years ($SD = 14.53$). The predictive factor of developing a pressure injury was body mass indexes (BMI). Those who were overweight or obesity were at 1.37 times ($OR = 1.37$, 95 % CI [1.06, 1.77]) greater risk for developing a pressure injury than those who had a normal BMI. It also revealed that moisture ($OR = 0.51$, 95 % CI [0.27, 0.98]), mobility ($OR = 0.11$, 95 % CI [0.04, 0.25]), and friction or shearing ($OR = 0.42$, 95 % CI [0.19, 0.91]) were protective factors preventing pressure injuries. When the score for any one of these three factors increases 1 point, the potential to develop a pressure injury is likely to decrease. Therefore, care for critically-ill surgical patients with overweight or obesity, decreasing level of consciousness, immobilization, and having moist skin or poor skin sensation should be more focus. (Chanchalerm, Hamilton, Arsaviset, Chaimay, & Woradet, 2022, p.2)

Abstract 2, above, is much longer because there is much more information that must be included. In this abstract, they had to present the study population information, a specialized research instrument and its characteristics, the types of statistics used, and the outcomes of the analysis, in addition to the information needed in **Abstract 1**. However, the flow, clarity, and use of clear, concise, simple language

to communicate the information (content) is quite similar. That is the key to a good abstract. It gives the reader what they need in terms of information to allow them to determine if the article is relevant to them and make them interested in reading it. It does it presenting the content in a clear, concise manner using a simple structure, and language that are easy to follow and understand.

To improve your abstract writing, pay attention to the abstracts you read when you are doing literature reviews or thumbing through the latest edition of the *Journal of Health and Nursing Education*, or any other journal, and notice the features that make them interesting and able to communicate clearly. You will notice that they will have these three things in common: the content is presented in an orderly and concise manner, in simple, easy to understand language. That is the secret of writing good abstracts. Good luck and good writing!

References

- Doommai, N., Chiaranai, C., & Hamilton, S. (2021). Nurse's role in high alert drug administration. *Journal of Health and Nursing Education*, 27(2), 227-240. Retrieved from <https://he02.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/Jolbcnm/article/view/253664/173899>
- Chanchalerm, K., Hamilton, S., Arsaviset, L., Chaimay, B., & Woradet, S. (2022). Predictive and protective factors related to the occurrence of pressure injuries among critically-ill surgery patients: A retrospective, case-control study. *Journal of Health and Nursing Education*, 28(1), e257879, 1-16. Retrieved from <https://he02.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/Jolbcnm/article/view/257879/176190>