

How To (Re-)Write An Abstract

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Here is our advice about how to earn a high mark on the article abstract assignment. Following this advice will also make you a better writer in other courses and contexts.

Choose an Article You Find Interesting

Before you decide which article you will abstract, watch the *How to Read Critically* video. Then read at least two or three articles from the approved list. Because you will need to read and *reread* the article to write your abstract, choose an article you find interesting. Interest in a subject usually translates into engaging writing, and a bored writer usually produces a bored reader.

An Abstract is Not a Summary

An abstract, unlike a summary, **does not** chronologically summarize the original article in a condensed form. Instead, an abstract includes the main argument and only the most important supporting points and evidence. An abstract not only leaves out less important points, it often organizes the ideas quite differently from the original article.

One way to understand what goes into a good abstract is to imagine you are walking into a test with a friend who hasn't done the reading. Your friend says to you, panicking, "Quick, tell me in 30 seconds what the article is about."

Move from Writer-Based to Reader-Based Writing

The writing you are about to do divides into two categories – writer-based and reader-based. **Writer-based writing** is done by the writer, for the writer. These are notes you make for yourself—that only you will read, including notes on the article and ideas or questions that occur to you. Because only you will read this writing, you don't need to worry about paragraph structure, sentence structure, spelling, grammar, or other niceties. You are the only reader. If you can understand what you wrote, it is good enough.

You will eventually transform your notes into *reader*-based writing, which meets the expectations of your **audience** for a familiar structure (introduction, middle, conclusion), understandable ideas and terminology (no technical jargon), correct grammar, spelling, etc. Knowing who your readers are is one of two essential ingredients for transforming writer-based notes into reader-based writing. For this assignment:

Your audience is the general public. Assume your audience has some education and background in current affairs and understands basic economic concepts, but is not knowledgeable about the details of economic theory or policy. In other words, you'll need to explain any economic concepts you address in a way that keeps their interest and respects their intelligence. Your audience is *not* the professor or the TAs. You need to write more like a journalist than an academic.

The other essential ingredient is having a clear thesis. In this assignment, that means identifying the **main argument of the article**. You don't have to, and should *not*, express your own opinion about the article. (You will do that in the next Op-Ed assignment.) Your job here is conveying to the reader the main argument of the article itself. Identifying the thesis is crucial because it will tell you what is to be included in *writing* the abstract for your audience, and what is to be left out as less important.

Reader-based writing involves making the main argument (or thesis statement) of the article clear to readers, whatever their background knowledge. This means that you need to present the argument hierarchically. The general thesis statement must be supported by specific evidence. You must orient your readers with an introduction that gives them the context and any background information necessary for them to understand the argument, develop the argument in your middle paragraph(s), and restate the argument and explain its importance in your conclusion.

Don't Submit Your First Draft: Draft, Revise, And Edit

"A 'C' paper is just an 'A' paper turned in too soon."

John C Bean, *Engaging Ideas*

Many novice student writers often submit first drafts and wonder why they earn poor marks. However, good writing almost always requires *rewriting*. To move from writer-based to reader-based writing you need to (1) **DRAFT**, (2) **REVISE**, and (3) **EDIT** your work before submitting it. *Expect to do at least four drafts and revisions of your abstract (yes, four) and remember that as you write you may need to go back to one of the earlier stages.*

Writing Stage	Focus of writing
1. DRAFTING involves getting writer's ideas down in writing	Writer-based
2. REVISING involves adding, deleting, rewriting, and moving entire paragraphs, sentences, and words	Moving from writer-based to reader-based
3. EDITING involves correcting grammar, spelling, punctuation, and formatting.	Reader-based

Prepare to Write

Print out your article. It's much easier to read carefully and to take notes with a hard (paper) copy of the article. Use a pencil and eraser (not a highlighter) for what follows.

Highlighters are permanent. As you reread an article, your understanding of what is most important will change. Studies show that highlighting is the *least* effective way of remembering what you read, because it is passive. Taking the time to write a question or note forces you to recall the information, establishing longer-lasting neural pathways in your brain.

DRAFTING STAGE Draft 1: Writer-Based Writing for Yourself

As you read your chosen article, you are thinking through the article and making written notes for yourself – the writer. In addition to making notes on the hard copy, you should write notes on a separate piece of paper or type them into your computer.

- On the hard copy, use a pencil or pen to underline or circle what you think are **key words and sentences**.
- **Paraphrase** (put the ideas into your own words) **and summarize** the key points of the article. ***Don't copy the original language from the article, except a few of the key terms.*** Use your own words as much as possible to avoid plagiarism. If in doubt, talk to a Writing Centre instructor.
- **Identify** claims or statements, evidence (supporting facts, data, examples, appeals to expertise, etc.) used, and counter-arguments or opposing points of view.
- **Ask questions** such as “where is the evidence for this claim?” or “is this a fair assumption to make?”
- **Make observations and judgments** about the article’s argument such as “this claim is well-supported with evidence” or “this seems like an exaggeration given the evidence presented.”
- **Identify economic concepts or reasoning the article uses.** What concepts are defined, explained, implied (some may be only hinted at but not stated), or used?
- **Identify the main argument.** Without looking at the article, write in one sentence what you think is the thesis or main argument.

NO OUTSIDE RESEARCH: Your focus should be on your article. *You don't need to do any research and adding outside references will lower your mark.*

REVISING STAGE **Draft 2: Move to Reader-Based**

With the thesis of the article in mind, start structuring your ideas into paragraphs that will make sense to your intended general audience. Don't worry about sentence structure or wording. Focus on paragraph structure.

Take your notes from Draft 1 and organize them into logical and coherent paragraphs. Each paragraph should have one main idea. With an assignment limit of 250-300 words, your abstract should have **3-4 paragraphs** and **each paragraph about 2-4 sentences**.

You want to end up with

- An **Introductory paragraph** explaining the article’s topic and main argument, possibly with background information necessary to understand the argument.
- **1 or 2 Middle paragraphs** explaining the main claims and supporting evidence, and any opposing arguments.
- A **Concluding paragraph** explaining the implications of the article and that answers the question “So what?” or “Why does this issue matter?”

One way (there are others) to start Draft 2 is to write out just the topic sentences (or at least topics) for each paragraph. This is much like an outline. See if the order of paragraphs will make sense to your readers. If not, move them around, or add or rewrite topic sentences, until they do.

Once you (tentatively) decide on the number and order of paragraphs, try writing the full 2 to 4 sentences of each paragraph. Do **not** use one-sentence paragraphs that you often see in media stories. Each paragraph should have an obvious topic sentence, and everything in the paragraph should relate to that topic sentence.

Once you have drafted your paragraphs, check that they are ordered in a way that will make sense to your readers. There should be smooth and logical transitions between paragraphs and no big jumps that might confuse your readers.

REVISING STAGE Draft 3: Revise for Your Reader

Since you are writing for a general audience, carefully consider what your readers need to know to understand the article, and what they *don't* need to know. In other words, try to think like your readers and anticipate their background knowledge. Decide what terms you need to define, and what terms you can simply use.

Chances are that your draft is too short or too long. Draft 3 is where you **revise** the content and paragraph structure to meet the word count. If your draft is too short (less than 250 words) then go back to Draft 1 and reread the article for additional details. Make sure you include important supporting evidence such as examples or relevant data. If your draft is too long (more than 300 words) then look for sentences that you can delete or condense. Delete any repetition or secondary details, evidence, arguments. Look also for words to cut out. A famous rule for good writing is that if it is possible to delete a word without losing meaning, then do so.

Check for sentences where you may have used *passive voice* and change these, where appropriate to *active voice*. For example, replace the use of passive voice such as “surge pricing is seen negatively” (a sentence that makes it unclear *who* sees surge pricing negatively) with “consumers view pricing negatively” or the passive voice, “Wait times were decreased by the use of surge pricing” with the active voice, “surge pricing reduced wait times.” For a detailed explanation of passive and active voice, click here <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/539/01/>

You may have to repeat your Draft 3 revisions. For example, if your previous draft was too short and you added material, your abstract may now be too long. Or vice versa. *Revision is a recursive process.*

EDITING STAGE Draft 4: Edit and Proofread for your Reader

Your draft doesn't have to be perfect, but the fewer errors it has the better impression you'll make on your readers and the easier it will be for them to focus on what you're saying and not on *how* you're saying it. Therefore **spellcheck** and then **print out** your latest draft and read it aloud. Make sure you are using complete sentences, and that the grammar and spelling are correct. Even better, get a friend to read it aloud and listen carefully to where she stumbles or is confused. Fix these awkward or confusing passages.

A common mistake students make in editing is to replace small words with bigger words that sound more “sophisticated” or “academic.” Another rule for good writing is to never use a long word where a short one will do. The quality of your reasoning is what counts, not big words or complicated sentences.

Review your paragraph structure (including topic sentences) and the transitions between paragraphs.

Submit to peerScholar

Copy and paste your Draft 4 into the Create textbox of peerScholar, and pat yourself on the back. But don't relax entirely. Once you get back comments and suggestions from classmates, go back and repeat the Draft 3 and Draft 4 stages one more time. Good writing requires rewriting: Easy writing makes difficult reading. Revise your words so others can read and understand them.