

# How to Write a Winning Abstract

Writing proposals is a valuable skill for honors students. To win a slot on a conference program, to win a research grant, to persuade professors to be on your research committee—these goals and others require that you write a powerful proposal. This sheet gives advice on **writing the abstract for your proposal**.

An abstract is a **summary of what you've done or propose to do**. Say you're trying for a slot at your regional honors conference. You want to read a research paper, present a poster, lead a panel discussion, perform a sonata you've written, or whatever. The program chair requires a 150-word abstract. Now what?

A winning abstract shows the program chair (a) you're doing honors-level work and (b) your presentation will draw an audience. So your abstract has to have both credibility and general interest. Your abstract is a sales pitch.

1) **Consider your audience.** If you're applying to a disciplinary conference, have your mentor show you program materials from past conferences. Imitate the style, use the jargon, do the disciplinary tap-dance you see there. That's how you get credibility with that audience. But an honors conference has a different audience. Write for non-specialists as well as specialists.

2) **Show the importance.** Your fellow chemistry majors will be fascinated to know that "Degussa P25 was the most active form of anatase  $\text{TiO}_2$  especially when immobilized on glass beads." Technical information has a place in your abstract. But it's more important to show why your project matters, to say "These experiments are significant for ecology. They show considerable promise for the use of highly concentrated sunlight in the removal of textile dyes and biological stains from wastewater."

3) **Be concrete.** Don't let your abstract be too abstract. It's neither interesting nor informative to read, "Our panel will share some ideas for a student leadership in an honors program." It's more convicting to read, "Our panel will demonstrate how our honors student senate has raised \$1,000 for scholarships (without doing car washes), has increased our honors applications by phone recruiting, and has set up a service project with a local grade school." People will come to hear that.

4) **Show conviction.** Your abstract doesn't have to read like a car commercial. But the reader wants to know that you care about your topic. Don't let a slack style indicate that "This is one of my better research papers from last semester, and I thought I'd get an item for my resume by reading it to you."

5) **Use direct phrasing.** Don't waste space with "The intention of my presentation is to . . ." Be direct: "Voter registration patterns in Detroit seem to vary with . . ." Be very sparing with personal pronouns. It's OK to say "Our panel" or "my internship," but generally stay in third person.

6) **Use the full length.** Don't skimp. If the application calls for 150 words, turn in at least 120. If it calls for 250 words, turn in at least 230. It's a competition, remember. Why would the organizers pick an abstract of 45 words when another abstract has the 150 words they asked for? The student who wrote the full-length abstract gave them more information than the student who wrote the skimpy one--more evidence of superior work, more data, more examples. No wonder the conscientious student gets the grant money or the slot on the conference program.

7) **Start preparing early.** Respect your audience and respect the organizers (a) by turning in a clean, perfectly spelled, often-revised document and (b) having something solid to present. Procrastination is the common character flaw in smart people. We stall around, then blast out a superior product at the last minute—just because we can. Please learn now that you can get away with it often but not always. If your proposal and abstract are badly written and don't seem to deal with something that matters, they deserve rejection. Make your honors proposal honors-worthy.