Abstracts

What You Should Know to Conduct an Effective Classroom Workshop

To best prepare for the “Abstracts” workshop, you should know the topic inside and out. Become familiar with the basic components of abstracts, and learn the components and functions of each type (descriptive and informative). This document provides examples of each type, illustrating the differences between them. Hopefully, you will be fully able to explain abstracts to students and answer questions about them.

Basic Descriptive Abstract

A descriptive abstract includes the purpose, methods, and scope of the work, but not the results, conclusions, or recommendations made by the piece. These are left out to encourage further reading.


This dissertation examines the impacts of social movements through a multi-layered study of the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement from its peak in the early 1960s through the early 1980s. By examining this historically important case, I clarify the process by which movements transform social structures and the constraints movements face when they try to do so. The time period studied includes the expansion of voting rights and gains in black political power, the desegregation of public schools and the emergence of white-flight academies, and the rise and fall of federal anti-poverty programs. I use two major research strategies: (1) a quantitative analysis of county-level data and (2) three case studies. Data have been collected from archives, interviews, newspapers, and published reports. This dissertation challenges the argument that movements are inconsequential. Some view federal agencies, courts, political parties, or economic elites as the agents driving institutional change, but typically these groups acted in response to the leverage brought to bear by the civil rights movement. The Mississippi movement attempted to forge independent structures for sustaining challenges to local inequities and injustices. By propelling change in an array of local institutions, movement infrastructures had an enduring legacy in Mississippi.

**Purpose** – The purpose is clearly outlined and defined. The author does include extra details such as the dates and what he hopes to achieve (to clarify) but is concise enough to not distract.

**Scope** – The author describes what is included, what data is analyzed. Additionally he mentions how he does this (part of the method).

Additionally, this abstract includes some conclusions. Often, results are not included in a descriptive abstract but he does not mention specific results and just offers a general conclusion to his research.
Comparison of a Descriptive and an Informative Abstract on the Same Topic


**Descriptive Abstract**

The three kinds of special writing assignments dealt with in this chapter are writing about literature, writing essay examinations, and writing reports. Sets of questions are proposed to help students generate ideas for an analysis, interpretation, or evaluation of fiction, drama, and poetry. Practical advice is given about how to write satisfactory answers in an essay examination. The special considerations and formats of informative and persuasive reports are discussed, and special attention is paid to the writing of descriptive and informative abstracts.

**Notice that scope is interwoven in the abstract as well — it is not defined separately. The sections can and do overlap!**

**Informative Abstract**

In writing about literature, the student is involved in one or more of these acts: analyzing, interpreting, or evaluating. In an analysis of a literary text, the two general questions to be answered are (1) what is the work about? and (2) how is the work put together? In an interpretation of literary text, the two general questions to be answered are (1) what did the author mean? and (2) what did the work mean to you? In an evaluation of a literary text, the two general questions to be answered are (1) how well did the author accomplish what he or she set out to do? and (2) was the work worth your time and attention? Sets of more particular questions can lead the student to more specific answers to these general questions.

In writing answers to essay-examination questions, the student should (1) read the questions carefully, (2) address the questions head-on, (3) plan the answers, (4) develop answers adequately, and (5) avoid padding answers. Examples of answers to an examination question in American history illustrate adequate and inadequate answers.

In writing both informative and persuasive reports, the student should give special consideration to the completeness, accuracy, intelligibility, readability, and objectivity of the report. The twelve parts of a typical formal report are (1) the letter of transmittal, (2) the title page, (3) the table of contents, (4) the table of illustrations, tables, charts, and graphs, (5) the abstract, (6) the introduction, (7) the body of the report, (8) the list of conclusions, (9) the list of recommendations, (10) the appendices, (11) the list of references, and (12) the index. Because of the importance of the abstract, both as a separate form and as a part of the report, procedures for writing descriptive and informative abstracts of this chapter of the book are presented.

In the next chapter, in the section on reference books, you will find descriptions of some of the collections of abstracts in the sciences and the humanities. You should consult some of these for further examples of abstracts—an increasingly important form of writing in the modern world.
Basic Informative Abstract

An informative abstract includes the purpose, methods, and scope of work, but also the results, conclusions, or recommendations made by the piece. It can be about 250 to about 700 words, taking up a paragraph or a page.


Animals that travel together in groups display a variety of fascinating motion patterns thought to be the result of delicate local interactions among group members. Although the most informative way of investigating and interpreting collective movement phenomena would be afforded by the collection of high-resolution spatiotemporal data from moving individuals, such data are scarce and are virtually non-existent for long-distance group motion within a natural setting because of the associated technological difficulties. Here we present results of experiments in which track logs of homing pigeons flying in flocks of up to 10 individuals have been obtained by high-resolution lightweight GPS devices and analysed using a variety of correlation functions inspired by approaches common in statistical physics. We find a well-defined hierarchy among flock members from data concerning leading roles in pairwise interactions, defined on the basis of characteristic delay times between birds’ directional choices. The average spatial position of a pigeon within the flock strongly correlates with its place in the hierarchy, and birds respond more quickly to conspecifics perceived primarily through the left eye—both results revealing differential roles for birds that assume different positions with respect to flock-mates. From an evolutionary perspective, our results suggest that hierarchical organization of group flight may be more efficient than an egalitarian one, at least for those flock sizes that permit regular pair wise interactions among group members, during which leader–follower relationships are consistently manifested.

Notice that this abstract contains only 233 words. If you read carefully, the components of the abstract—scope, purpose, methods, and results—may overlap at times. Depending on the author of the piece, some sections may serve as two components in one. The most important thing to know is that informative abstracts are like a summary of the piece. If you went through each section of the paper and highlighted main points, you would be creating an informative abstract.