

## A checklist for improving abstracts

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1. How many theme/theory words from the article title recur in the abstract? Does the abstract introduce any new theme/theory words, that are not present in the article title? Do the two sets of words fit closely together? [good] or suggest different emphases? [bad]
2. Style points: How many words are wasted on 'This article sets out to prove..' or 'Section 2 shows that...'? Get rid of all such 'blur' elements. Is the description of your own research in the present tense? [good] or the future tense?[bad]
3. Look carefully at the 'ordinary language' words in the title, and in the abstract text. Are they 'filler' words only? In which case, are they needed? If not, do they have a clear and precise meaning or implication that you want your title and abstract to express? (Most ordinary language words with substantive content will have multiple meanings).
4. Suppose that you have read on the Web (in a long list of other articles and items) the article title and the first three lines of the abstract. Are they informative? Do they make you want to download the full article? What kind of academics elsewhere will be able to reference this article usefully in their own work, from the information given in the title and abstract alone?
5. Type the whole title (in double quotes " ") into Google Scholar and check against the questions below.
  - How many items show up? None [good]. Many [poor].
  - How do most of the other references or items that show up relate to your topic and subject matter? Very close [good]. Close [OK]. Remote [bad]. Completely different topic [very bad]. Wrong discipline [very bad]
  - Does the search show that you are using terms, phrases or acronyms that – Have the same meaning as you are using? [good]. Or have a number of different meanings from your sense? [bad]
6. Now type the three or four most distinctive or memorable title or abstract words separately into the search engine, and check against the same questions.
  - How many items show up? None [bad]. Very few [bad]. Modest number [good] Lots and lots [bad] — it's an inverted U curve here.
  - How do most of the other references or items that show up relate to your topic and subject matter? Very close [good]. Close [OK]. Remote [bad]. Completely different topic [very bad]. Wrong discipline [very bad]
  - Does the search show that you are using terms, phrases or acronyms that — Have the same meaning as you are using? [good]. — Or have a number of different meanings from your sense? [bad] Article titles need to be less distinctive than books or theses, or chapters in these longer works. It is fine for your title and abstract to have some of the key words used by other authors, but preferably in some distinctive combination with other (ordinary language) words.
7. How does your abstract (and article title) sit within the journal title itself, which often gives readers many clues to what the work is about? Are you wasting words in the abstract explaining things that the journal title already makes clear?

## Afterword

As with all checklists or guidelines, remember too that academia works best when researchers are inventive. Consider, for instance, the article by M.V. Berry and colleagues in the *Journal of Physics A: Mathematical and Theoretical* (2011) entitled: 'Can apparent superluminal neutrino speeds be explained as a quantum weak measurement?' Their abstract was two words long: 'Probably not'.

*To put these ideas in a wider context, readers at PhD or higher level might find it helpful to read parts of my book: Patrick Dunleavy, 'Authoring a PhD' (Palgrave, 2003). See also useful material on the [LSE's Impact blog](#) and on Twitter: [@Write4Research](#).*