

Professional Methods  
Notes on Conference Abstracts

- (1) Have a clear point to make, and make it clearly
  - a. The point should not be too big. (Not too small either, but that is a less common mistake.) The reviewers have to believe you can actually get your point across in the allotted time.
  - b. Come to the point fairly quickly. Avoid having a whole page of background, assumptions, data, and then only at the very end indicating what your abstract will really be about.
  - c. However, you do need to give enough background so that the reviewers will be able to understand your point. This is particularly important if you are relying on something new or unfamiliar.
  - d. But you should try to avoid relying on non-standard assumptions.
- (2) There must be something novel about your point, and that must come across explicitly. It has to be clear to the reviewers what your original contribution is.
  - a. The novelty might be new data; or a new account of old data; or a new technical or conceptual point; or a new connection between two pieces of old data;... But there has to be something.
  - b. The point might be some new (or even old) data and problems it raises for some widely assumed theory.
  - c. Make sure that your point is relevant to a wide audience--making a point about a theory nobody has heard of will not do.
  - d. A merely mechanical exercise or application is unlikely to be accepted.
- (3) You will stand a better chance of getting accepted with a “positive” abstract than with a “negative” abstract (i.e. an abstract that merely argues against something).
- (4) Make the relevance to some important issue clear.
- (5) You will not be able to address everything you have in your paper in the abstract. You need to choose well what to present. For example, you may have five arguments for your point in the paper. You will not have enough space to go through all of them in the abstract. Choose a couple of them and spell them out sufficiently so that the reviewers can follow them and evaluate them. It is much better to give only a fraction of your arguments in the abstract but spell them out sufficiently than try to cram all of your arguments into the abstract without spelling out any of them sufficiently. The latter is a recipe for rejection. Most importantly, don't simply say: “I will explain this phenomenon.” Why should the referees believe you will be successful in this? (You may get away with saying (once you have given the case for your central proposal) that you will, for example, explore consequences of your proposal for a certain phenomenon, but don't turn your case for your central point into a list of promises of this sort.)
- (6) Try to use the following organization for your abstract:
  - a. introduction, where you will state what your abstract is about and what you will show
  - b. body of the abstract, where you will provide arguments for your point
  - c. conclusion, where you will remind the reviewers what your contribution is.

- (7) The title is important. Try to come up with one that is both catchy and informative.
- (8) End strongly.
- (9) Write concisely. Think of Hemingway, not Faulkner.
  - a. Example: Instead of "What I have found to be interesting about phenomenon P is that it has the following two properties" say "Phenomenon P has the following two interesting properties."
  - b. Don't be redundant. Repetition in a paper is often useful, but almost never in an abstract.
- (10) Use all the space available. If the specifications call for one page, don't use just half a page.
- (11) Don't cheat to fit more in. Use the stated font size, margins, etc. And absolutely don't go over the page limit. The organizers for most conferences will simply throw away your second page (or the whole thing) if they have specified one page.
- (12) Be neat and accurate. No typos.
- (13) Use correct characters for non-English words. NEVER use English words for examples from other languages (like Chomsky often does when he writes about Icelandic).
- (14) Be relevant. Never mention a language, phenomenon, analysis, generalization, without saying how it is directly relevant.
- (15) Say exactly what languages you are talking about, and make it clear whether you are making a claim just about these languages, or about language more generally.
- (16) Provide glosses and translations for all examples that are not in the language of the conference.
- (17) If the data you are relying on are not completely standard, consider indicating where you got them and why they are reliable.
  - a. If the data are at all controversial, seriously consider acknowledging this.
- (18) Often new proposals are false, on the face of it. But if your proposal is like that, you can't wait until the conference to show that it isn't false. (Why? Because you will never get that far. The abstract will be rejected.)
- (19) Do give enough background that the reviewers will be able to understand your point. This is particularly important if you are relying on something new or unfamiliar.
- (20) Give (just) enough data. Frequently, when I am reviewing abstracts, I get one or two with no data. I never give them a high score, and I am sure I am not alone in this.
- (21) Cite directly relevant literature. If you don't, the reviewers will think you don't know it (or worse, that you are pirating ideas).
  - a. The citations should be primary sources (not, for example, text books).
  - b. The citations should be as up-to-date as possible (without sounding merely trendy). Suppose your topic involves locality of movement. Even if it would make your life easier to talk in terms of Chomsky 1973 Subjacency (or Ross 1967 islands), that generally won't suffice. You have to show that you are aware of current work in your area.
  - c. Omitting relevant references to your reviewers' work can get them upset. (Since the reviewers are supposed to be knowledgeable about the topics they are reviewing it is likely that they have written about them.)
- (22) DON'T misrepresent anyone. Don't gratuitously attack anyone. Be diplomatic. The linguist you insult might well be your reviewer.

- (23) NEVER ever say "Time permitting, I will..." You know how much time you will have. (What do you think? That the moderator will be so overwhelmed by your brilliance that you will be awarded an extra 10 minutes?)
- (24) Here's a useful rhetorical trick that shouldn't work, but it almost invariably does: If you have three pieces of evidence for your particular theory, don't say it that way. Instead, present two pieces of evidence. Then say "Now we have a prediction..." And present the third piece of evidence. [Logically, there is absolutely no difference between evidence for a theory and a correct prediction of a theory. But the latter is, somehow, more dramatic.]
- (25) Finally, perhaps most importantly, the abstract reviewing process is something of a crapshoot. There is definitely an element of luck involved. It is possible to do everything right and still not have your abstract accepted. If your abstract is rejected, carefully evaluate it yourself, and try to learn from the rejection. But it could turn out that there is nothing to learn. If so, try again with that abstract at another conference. If it fails again, try another topic.