

# How to write a good abstract

## Some useful tips that will help get your abstract accepted by the ERS

The aim of the ERS Annual Congress is to support exchange of knowledge among the international respiratory community. Writing an abstract for the ERS Congress is an important way for you to communicate your scientific research or clinical practice with your peers and colleagues.

The ERS receives several thousands of abstracts every year for presentation at the Congress. Each of these abstracts is evaluated by three independent reviewers and scored (1-6) on its content and scientific merit. Abstracts above a mean score of 3.0 are accepted. Last year alone, the Programme Committee had to reject 828 abstracts because they did not score highly enough.

The scientific work behind rejected abstracts is often well conceived and carried out, but the text is written in such a manner that it cannot be accepted. This may mean that your good work is not communicated to your colleagues as it deserves.

In order to try and prevent this from happening, the following information will give you some practical advice about writing an abstract, which will then have the best possible chance of being rated highly by the reviewers and selected by the Programme Committee for the next ERS Annual Congress.

## Why write an abstract?

An abstract is a shortened version of the first draft of a paper. It is important for several reasons:

- it provides the first chance for you to announce and cite the preliminary findings of your study;
- it allows you to communicate your findings to your colleagues and get their feedback;
- it is the starting point for achieving the ultimate aim of a research project, the writing and publishing of a full paper in peer-reviewed literature.

## The optimal structure of an abstract

### Title

The title should be an accurate promise of the abstract's contents. It should explain as much as possible about the context and the aims of the study. Ideally, the title should be about 10–12 words long, and should include the scope of the investigation, the study design and the goal. In general, it is preferable to make the title a description of what was investigated rather than a statement of the results or conclusions. The abstract's title should be easy for the reader to understand and should not include jargon or unfamiliar acronyms or abbreviations.

## **Authors**

The list of authors should be restricted to those individuals who actually carried out the study, conceived it, designed it, gathered the data, analysed the numbers and wrote the abstract. The author who will present the abstract should be listed first. Every listed author should read and approve the abstract before it is submitted.

## **Main text**

A good abstract should address the five following questions in the relevant sections:

### **1. "Why did you start?" – Introduction or background**

You should summarise, preferably in one sentence, the current knowledge, or state-of-the-art, specifically in relation to the work you are presenting.

### **2. "What did you try to do?" – Aims and objectives**

Here, you should state the aim of the study, and ideally include a short statement of the study's hypothesis. A legitimate scientific study is not done "to prove that something is true" but rather "to find out whether it is true." The difference may seem small, but it makes a huge difference. A formal hypothesis shows that you were objective.

### **3. "What did you do?" – Methods**

In an abstract, the description of the methods has to be concise, and much of the details of what was done must be omitted. However, in a few short sentences, you can give the reader a good idea of the design of the study, the context in which it was done, and the types of patients or measurements that were included.

### **4. "What did you find?" – Results**

It is important to give the main results of the study, not just in subjective terms ("We found device X to be superior to device Y") but also in the form of some real data. You will need to choose which findings to report here: it should be the most important data in your study, and the findings on which your conclusions will be based. Do not include a table or figure unless you need it to show your results.

### **5. "What does it mean?" – Conclusions**

Here, space limitations generally limit you to a single sentence of why you think your findings are important, and their potential implications. Keep your conclusions reasonable and supportable by the findings of your study. Remember that if your study was restricted to certain patients, or a particular therapy, or a specific device, its results may not extend beyond these restrictions.

## **Some general advice for writing abstracts**

### **Follow the instructions**

However good your study was, it deserves the best possible chance for review and presentation. This means that you should follow the published guidelines for submission to the ERS Congress.

**Use simple sentences**

Unless they are basic, universally accepted abbreviations, like ARDS or FEV<sub>1</sub>, acronyms and abbreviations should be spelled out the first time they are used in the abstract. Similarly, local expressions and jargon should be kept out of the abstract. Keep in mind that healthcare practice varies from country to country.

**Ask your colleagues**

Before the abstract is submitted, it should be double-checked for accuracy, not only of the data reported but of the description of the methods and all other details.

Tables and figures should be checked especially carefully.

Having one or more colleagues (who were not involved in the study) read the abstract and offer constructive criticism can be extremely helpful.