

# Online Commentary for *Abstracts and the Writing of Abstracts*

*John M. Swales, Vera Irwin, & Christine B. Feak*

Before we get to the actual commentaries on the tasks, a few preliminary remarks would seem to be in order.

## **General Comments and Teaching Suggestions**

1. Regular users of the textbook (whether teachers, tutors, or independent scholars) may find it more convenient to print out this Commentary.
2. As in our previous volumes in the EAPP series, we are cautious about offering advice to our EAP colleagues, especially as they inevitably have a better understanding of their own teaching contexts than we do. So, all we provide here are a few suggestions of what has worked for us. We divide these comments into those that generally apply and those that relate to some specific task or activity.
3. There is probably more material here than can be worked through in the available time, so be selective in terms of what you focus on. And if you are teaching a group of people who all come from one field, such as medicine or psychology, then you will naturally want to bring in supplementary materials that more closely reflect your participants' interests.
4. It is our experience that most of the tasks are better undertaken by pairs or trios of participants. Discussion will be more lively; participants will feel that they have more to contribute; and additional pieces of information or points of view will probably emerge.

5. Remember the aim throughout is to raise participants' perceptions and sensitivities to the language and structure of texts and to raise their awareness of likely audience reactions to those texts. Try, therefore, to head off arguments and discussions that relate purely to the content of those texts.
6. If you are discussing participants' work in a class or workshop setting, bias for success; that is, focus on achievements rather than failures.
7. For quite a number of the commentaries, we offer the perspective of our research assistant, Vera Irwin, who, at the time of writing, is completing her dissertation in Linguistics. We have adopted this policy in order to better establish a *dialogue* between the tasks and the users of the book. And here it is important to remember that Vera's perspective is that of somebody on the borderland between the Social Sciences and the Humanities. If your research is situated elsewhere, such as on the borderland between Medicine and Engineering, your own perspective will often be different. Hence, we hope an enlightening conversation between the two perspectives will emerge.
8. An online commentary on the University of Michigan Press website is obviously a more flexible document than a printed volume. We welcome your comments and suggestions, which we may be able to incorporate in occasional updates. We can be most easily reached at [cfeak@umich.edu](mailto:cfeak@umich.edu) or [jmswales@umich.edu](mailto:jmswales@umich.edu).

## Specific Teaching Suggestions

1. In the text, the first actual abstract-writing activity does not occur until Task Eleven, until about one-third of the way through this short volume. You may want to ask for participant research paper abstracts earlier and perhaps even before the first class or workshop. (We haven't required this in the text itself because it is very hard to predict what might be written.) You might do this to get an early sense of participants' strengths and weaknesses and/or to get an early idea of the research projects that participants are—or have been—engaged in.

2. In free-writing tasks, like Task Eleven, especially with heterogeneous groups drawn from several disciplinary areas, we find that passing out anonymous lists of titles or opening sentences and asking participants to guess who wrote each one is an excellent way of bringing the groups together.
3. For Task Twenty-Five, draw a grid on the board and ask pairs to come up and write in their selections when they have finished. Create some extra columns if members of a pair do not entirely agree.
4. Task Twenty-Eight. If time permits, consider this activity for evaluating a conference abstract. Depending on the size and composition of the class, you can divide the class into two or more review panels set up by an (imaginary) regional multi-disciplinary conference for junior researchers. One panel might consist of engineers reviewing social science CAs, and the other the reverse. Whatever the decisions, make sure that participants will not be reviewing their own CAs!

Appoint review panel chairs, which then ask members to review the abstracts as:

- 1 = strong/excellent—must be included in the program
- 2 = fairly good—should get on the program if at all possible
- 3 = problematic/unconvincing/weak—only include if space needs to be filled

The panel chair will then call a short meeting to tally the rankings and make final decisions. Not more than 50 percent of the abstracts should receive any one of the three ratings.

When the panels reconvene, a representative of each panel should then announce which abstract received the highest rating and why. Congratulations will be in order. Before the class breaks up, each participant should choose an abstract and agree to send an email message to the author giving the panel's rating and explaining why the rating was given. A copy of this should also be sent to the instructor.

This would be a good time to review the rhetoric used in good and bad news email messages.

## Research Article Abstracts

### Task One

#### Functions of abstracts

In our view, when we are functioning as “normal academics,” Functions 2 and 3 are primary. But if we are working on a literature review, Function 1 can also be important. (And of course when we are doing discourse analysis—as in preparation for this unit!—we also think of abstracts as *mini-texts*.) Function 4 is not relevant. Both John and Chris act as reviewers for journal manuscripts, but we have never used 5. Even so, sometimes we are just sent the abstract of a manuscript submission and asked if we would feel comfortable reviewing the whole article.

Vera Irwin, our research assistant from Linguistics, ranked the functions in this order: 2, 1, 3, 5, 4.

One additional possibility is that abstracts can be used for organizing data to be incorporated into a literature review (see Volume 2). Another possibility in institutions where theses and dissertations are written in the local language is that the accompanying English abstracts can be used to showcase departmental research to the wider world. (John heard about this function when visiting Madrid Polytechnic University in 2007.)

### Task Two

#### Analysis of a political science abstract

1. The key clause is “. . . democracy has little or no effect on infant and child mortality rates” because it summarizes the main finding of the entire article.
2. a. Length seems to be related to the type of field: the “hard” sciences have longer abstracts than the “soft” ones. An average sentence length of around 25 words seems standard—and this is standard for research writing in general.  
  
b. You might like to do a quick count of one or two abstracts in your collection. A quick survey of 16 articles from applied linguistics produced the average number of sentences as 5.7, with a maximum of 10 and a minimum of 3; in other words, very close to Orasan’s findings for Linguistics as a whole.

3. This abstract is written in the present tense. Presenting the opening statement and the beliefs held by other researchers in the present tense makes them appear widespread and current. Presenting the results in the present tense makes them appear current, ongoing, and somewhat less “negotiable.”

According to Vera, it is typical for the field of Linguistics to present theoretical claims and statements in the present tense (to claim universality), but to resort to the past tense when discussing methodology. Results apparently vary between present and past tense.

4. Vera believes that in Linguistics (at least sociolinguistics), citations or references to previous research are not very common in RA abstracts. In Applied Linguistics, it is not uncommon to cite one study, especially if it is a recent one. We suspect that the citation is designed in part to offer an early indication that the ensuing article is up to date.
5. No, this abstract does not use *I* or *we* to refer to the authors. Rather, it uses the less personal *this article* to describe the work done by the researchers. In our experience, this is more typical for a journal article abstract as opposed to a conference abstract, where the use of *I* or *we* is more common. However, considerable disciplinary differences exist.
6. Yes, it is common to use metadiscoursal expressions in the field of linguistics. Examples: *this article*, *the article*, *this study*, *this research*, *this paper*, *this contribution*, *here*, *the study reported here*.
7. No acronyms/abbreviations are used in this abstract. Across the broad field of linguistics, some acronyms/abbreviations are used but not very many. In general, this is a topic that is under-researched.
8. Move 1: Sentences 1 and 3 (and notice the use of *claim* in Sentence 1)  
Move 2: Sentence 2  
Move 3: Sentence 2 (first part)  
Move 4: Sentence 4  
Move 4: Sentence 5

There are a couple of things to note here. The order of moves is somewhat flexible, and not all the moves may be realized. In this case, there is no obvious Move 5, such as, *This study shows that there is a liberal bias in many political science studies*.

## Task Three

### An analysis of four abstracts

#### A terminological note on Abstract 1:

Sentence 3 introduces a number of fancy expressions for types of employees. An *institutionalized star* would be a recognized “high-flyer”; a *lone wolf* “an active person operating largely independently”; a *citizen* is a “team player”; and an *apathetic* is a “person with little interest in or motivation for his or her job.”

Here are our analyses:

	Abstract 1	Abstract 2	Abstract 3	Abstract 4
1. Key clause	S③	S③	S⑦	S①
2. Length	Probably	A bit short?	Yes	Rather short
3. Verb tense	The author(s) use present tense through the entire abstract.	Mainly in present tense, with one instance of present perfect in S④.	Authors use present tense for introducing background and when describing the technique used. However, all specifics about methodology and results make use of the past tense.	Present tense describing the study, simple past when talking about biographical or historic information.
4. Citations?	The author(s) refer to a specific model (The Adaptive Response Model), and specific subfield of psychology (IO-Psychology).	No	No	No
5. First person pronoun?	No	Yes (②, ③, ⑥)	No	No
6. Meta-discourse?	Yes ( <i>This article</i> in Sentence ①)	No	No	Yes ( <i>This essay</i> in ①)
7. Acronym use?	Yes (ARM, IO-Psychology)	No	No	No

8. Move structure?	M1: - M2: ① M3: ② M4: ③ ④ M5: ⑤	M1: ①∞ M2: ② (end) M3: ② (beginning) M4: ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ M5: -	M1: ① ② M2: ③ M3: ③ ④ ⑤ M4: ⑤ ⑥ ⑦ M5: ⑦	M1: M2: ① M3: ④ M4: ② ③ M5:
--------------------	---	---	---	---

## Task Four

### Opening sentences of abstracts

1. Here are our offerings from the field of Applied Linguistics:

A. Phenomenon/practice

It is now common for Francophone researchers to include English language abstracts in their French-language papers.

B. Purpose

The purpose of this study is to compare research article abstracts written in English and French.

C. Researcher action

A corpus of French and English abstracts from bilingual journals was assembled.

2. As a further sample, we examined the opening sentences from the 16 RA abstracts in the final 2006 issue of *The American Economic Review* and found:

A. Phenomenon/practice      3 (instances)

B. Purpose      1

C. Researcher action      11

Unclassified: In this case, the opening was the single word *Yes*. The title was "Are technology improvements contradictory?"

We were quite surprised by these findings, especially by the large proportion of opening *researcher action* statements. In fact, most abstracts opened directly with statements of the form *We analyze . . .* or *We examine. . .* Further inquiry suggests that purposive statements can be quite rare in a number of fields; apart from economics, we found this to be so in architecture, chemical engineering, and marine biology.

## Task Five

### Opening sentences and second sentences

1. a. continuing
- b. capturing
- c. new

We might opt for Version C. because this is the most compact—always a consideration when writing abstracts! Further, *we* is not uncommon in physics abstracts.

2. a. new
- b. capturing
- c. continuing

We actually disagree on this one. Vera prefers a. and John c. John notes the nice nominalization of *As yet little is known* into *This lack of knowledge*.

3. a. new
- b. continuing
- c. capturing

A very difficult case; all three have their merits. But notice again the neat nominalization of *more likely to leave school at 16* into *Early school-leaving decisions . . . .*

## Task Six

### Move 3 in abstracts

Here are some observations.

- a. All are probably okay for length.
- b. Didar includes information on the impressive sample size, but Sunil and Cengiz do not.
- c. Sunil and Cengiz mention the interviews; Didar omits this aspect of the methodology.
- d. Didar makes it clearer that the four companies were deliberately chosen because they were different.
- e. We like Didar's version, but if there is still space, a short sentence about the interviews would help.

































