

Writing an abstract for a journal article
 (also applicable, in a slightly different form,
 to the abstract for a research report or thesis.)

Four moves

We think of an abstract as having four moves. We call these Locate, Focus, Report and Argue. We show these four moves in Figure 3.2.

LOCATE: this means placing the paper in the context of the discourse community and the field in general. Larger issues and debates are named and potentially problematised. In naming the location, the writer is creating a warrant for their contribution and its significance, as well as informing an international community of its relevance outside of its specific place of origin.

FOCUS: this means identifying the particular questions, issues or kinds of problems that the paper will explore, examine and/or investigate.

REPORT: this means outlining the research, sample, method of analysis in order to assure readers that the paper is credible and trustworthy, as well as the major findings that are pertinent to the argument to be made.

ARGUE: this means opening out the specific argument through offering an analysis. This will move beyond description and may well include a theorisation in order to explain findings. It may offer speculations, but will always have a point of view and take a stance. It returns to the opening Locate in order to demonstrate the specific contribution that was promised at the outset. It answers the 'So what?' and the 'Now what?' questions.

Figure 3.2 The four moves of a Tiny Text

We now show an example of these four moves as they apply to one of our own abstracts (Abstract 3.1) from the *Educational Researcher*.

The failure of dissertation advice books: towards alternative pedagogies for doctoral writing

LOCATE: Anxious doctoral researchers can now call on a proliferation of advice books telling them how to produce their dissertations. While these might be helpful in the short term they offer little that the doctoral

researcher can use to analyse their own texts or to understand the source of their anxieties.

FOCUS: This article reveals some characteristics of the self-help genre through a textual analysis of a corpus of published books, delineating their key genre characteristics.

REPORT: Our analysis shows that the texts: produce an expert–novice relationship with readers; reduce the dissertation to a series of steps; claim to reveal hidden rules; and assert a mix of certainty and fear to position readers 'correctly'.

ARGUE: We argue for a more complex view of doctoral writing as both text work–identity work and as a discursive social practice. We reject transmission pedagogies that normalise the power-saturated relations of protégée/master and point to alternative pedagogical approaches that positions doctoral researchers as colleagues engaged in a shared, common, unequal and changing practice.

(adapted from Kamler and Thomson, 2008)

Abstract 3.1 Four moves in a published paper

In the Locate we have identified an issue and suggested that it is problematic and, by inference, that we have a different view. Given this, we offer a specific Focus which is designed to allow us to say something about the problem we have identified. In Report we detail the four findings that have resulted from our analysis. In Argue we offer a theoretical framework and on the basis of this propose a course of action. The title clearly signals our critique in the word *failure* and our contribution in the phrase *alternative pedagogies*.

What goes in the four moves varies in length and complexity. Sometimes the article is situated in a field where there is considerable debate and the writer needs to state their position quite clearly. So sometimes the Locate work, for example, will be more descriptive and sometimes more argumentative. Some arguments might lead to more than one conclusion. Some may provide a challenge to existing thinking, a new lens on the problem(s) or a potential implication for a more general issue. These are categories of moves, not recipes for how much to say about what.

Writing a thesis abstract

Cooley and Lewkowicz (2003, p. 112) give this advice on the thesis abstract:

[The Abstract] is written after the research has been completed and the writer knows exactly what is contained in the body of the text. It is a summary of the text and it informs readers of what can be found in the dissertation and in what order, functioning as an overall signpost for the reader. Although it is the last part of a dissertation to be written, it is generally one of the first a reader will look at. Indeed, if the Abstract is not well written, it may be the only part of the dissertation a reader will look at!

We disagree with this advice. The abstract is not a summary, it is an argument, writ small. And it is not best left until the bitter end. We see thesis abstracts as an iterative process: begun early and revised/revisited until the end.

We trawled many writing advice sites to examine the advice DRs are offered about how to write abstracts. We don't want to name and shame anyone here, but we saw too many dubious handy hints. A lot of advice does suggest that the abstract is a summary. We also saw a lot of technical advice – such as assigning one sentence to capture each chapter in a cumulative fashion, cutting and pasting sentences from key passages of the thesis to get a first draft. This confuses the road map for the thesis with the abstract.

It is more useful to think of the thesis abstract as a mini-statement of the thesis. It presents *all* of the moves that are in the larger text. The thesis abstract is not a trailer. It's not an advertisement for what is to come. It's not a foreword, preamble or introduction. It's not the blurb on the back of the book or a sales pitch per se. It's also not the same as the research proposal: it's not about what you're going to do, but what you've done, how, in what way, what this means and how it constitutes a contribution to knowledge. The thesis abstract is a tiny version of the bigger whole.

And it is a very important little text. It is the first thing your examiner reads. It must be written with authority. It sets the tone for what is to come. On the basis of the abstract alone, before they start the text proper, the examiner will form expectations about what is to follow – how well the thesis is likely to be written, whether it is going to be well argued and evidenced, whether it is going to be lively or dull.

Thesis abstracts are also important for readers beyond the examiners. They might be reprinted in indexes such as ERIC or PsycInfo. People doing literature searches generally read an abstract in a digital thesis collection before deciding whether the whole thing is worth reading. So the thesis abstract quite often stands in for the entire thesis. It's actually a high-stakes bit of writing.

It's a mistake to dash off the abstract at the last minute before handing in the thesis. No matter how desperate you are to be rid of it, no matter how sick and tired you are of it, you need to spend time fine-tuning this tiny bit of prose. We say fine-tune, because we see the thesis abstract as a text you write and rewrite continuously.

Our approach is to treat the abstract as an extended argument. It must therefore state the problem, establish its importance, show what you've actually done, and make the case that this is a sound piece of research which adds to knowledge. We use the four moves we introduced in Chapter 5 to achieve this work: Locate, Focus, Report, Argue. We specify these moves for the thesis abstract in Figure 7.1.

LOCATE – Place the thesis within the discipline and the field. Relate the topic to relevant issues, debates, practice problems or social trends and from a critical perspective. Create an explicit warrant for the research, its significance and the contribution.

FOCUS – Identify the particular questions, issues or kinds of problems or problematisations that you will investigate.

REPORT – Provide a short economical statement of the research design – e.g. the nature of the research, participants and/or the corpus of data, how these were chosen, the method of analysis – to show the thesis is credible and trustworthy. Outline the major findings that form the basis of the argument to come.

ARGUE – Explain the results and their significance. Connect to the current state of knowledge, show what the research has added. This may go beyond analysis to some form of new conceptual or theoretical framing. You must answer the 'so what', and the 'now what' questions.

FIGURE 7.1 Moves in a thesis abstract

from: Thomson, P. & Kanler, B. 2015. *De-text Your Writing: Strategies for Doctoral Researchers*. London & New York: Routledge.

Five moves

Recently we have experimented with a more scaffolded version of the four moves, particularly for writers who want to enter a discourse community where there is a strong focus on methodology. We added an additional category – that of Anchor to follow Focus – in order to separate out a clear and succinct description of methods from the Report of the findings. Abstract 3.2 shows these five moves as they apply to one of Pat's abstracts (Thomson, 2011).

Creative leadership: a new category or more of the same?

LOCATE: New categories of leadership are continually being invented. Because the ways we think are productive of the ways in which we act, it is important to hold these rhetorical innovations to account.

FOCUS: This paper focuses on the latest of the leadership categories – creative leadership.

ANCHOR: Mobilising a Foucauldian notion of 'discourse' I deconstruct the notion of creative leadership as it has recently been represented in five published texts.

REPORT: I suggest that the interpretation on offer has a determinist view of the future, ignores the history of debates about creativity, offers creativity as a generic skill and underestimates what it is that teachers and leaders might need to do in order to work creatively. I show that the notion of creative leadership on offer is strongly connected with that of creative learning, and put the 'recipe' offered by one set of texts into conversation with a body of empirical evidence about what is happening in schools that aim to promote creative learning.

ARGUE: I argue that what is evident from the dialogue between the texts and the empirical studies is that it is pedagogical leadership/that is absent but is actually most required, embedded in leadership/management principles and practices that promote social justice.

(Thomson, 2011)

Abstract 3.2 Five moves in a published paper

In Abstract 3.2, the separation out of the Anchor, the term intended to indicate the foundations on which the report is made, ensures that the writer makes a specific statement about the empirical work that has been done. In this case, it is relatively short; in larger studies this might extend to two or three sentences. Some journals are particularly anxious about ensuring that methodology and methods are made explicit in both the article and the abstract, and the addition of this Anchor move achieves that end.

Three moves

Another variation we are currently working with is a reduction from four to three moves. This change was a response to the demand by workshop participants for a framing that would support more theoretically oriented papers. In this version, Focus and Report are replaced by Problematiser, which is in reality an exploration of the issues outlined in Locate. The example in Abstract 3.3 from *Nurse Education Today* illustrates these three moves.

Writing up and writing as: rediscovering nursing scholarship

LOCATE: Nursing is a relatively young academic discipline which only moved en masse into the higher education sector in many countries during the 1990s. Perhaps in a bid to enhance and accelerate its credibility, the nursing academy has embraced the values and practices of evidence-based medicine and the associated 'gold-standard' experimental research paradigm as its dominant discourse.

PROBLEMATISE: Empirical scientific research has become the most valued and highly rewarded activity for nurse academics to pursue, and the tenets and standards of research have come to define the entire academic project of nursing. As a result, there has been a gradual shift from nursing as an academic discipline founded on scholarship to one based on research. Research is no longer seen as merely one aspect of the scholarly work expected of an academic, and is now often regarded as the main (and sometimes the only) activity necessary to gain promotion.

ARGUE: I argue in this paper for a more positive view of scholarship; indeed, that scholarly activity is both the foundation and the creative driver of the academy. I suggest that the 'gold-standard' academic output of the research report is restricted in the contribution it is able to make

to the development of the discipline of nursing, and that a far broader and more critical academic base is required. Whilst empirical research supplies the basic building blocks of the discipline, it is critical and creative scholarship that provides the plans and designs that turn these piles of bricks into useful structures.

(Rolfé, 2009)

Abstract 3.3 Three moves in a published paper

In this abstract the Locate is a description of a current situation, giving background and context to the issue. The Problematiser is evaluative and makes claims about a serious shortcoming within the field. This is a kind of meta-analysis offering a bird's eye view of a trend in an entire field. Argue provides the opportunity for the writer to suggest an alternative approach which is grounded in an explicit philosophical position, the practical implications of this are indicated. This kind of article can be seen as a form of professing where a problem in the field is identified and an argument is made for a new, and better direction.

In offering this abstract it is important to recall Stephen's experience which we described in Chapter 2. He chose to make a critical intervention in a discourse community which was hostile to such an activity. In Abstract 3.3 we can assume that the discourse community in this journal was receptive to internal debate. We note that the writer, Gary Rolfé, says that nurse education is a young discipline and this may have something to do with its willingness to entertain articles which examine the field itself.

We can safely assume that in the article Rolfé is able to offer evidence of his engagement with the breadth and depth of literatures in the field and that this is the basis for his argument. However, on the basis of the abstract alone, readers would not be surprised to find out that the writer was beyond early career status. Rolfé certainly writes as if he is an experienced and senior figure in the field, and indeed when we googled him, we discovered that he was a professor of nursing. We note that it is always more possible for senior members of the field to write these kinds of critiques because of their in-depth knowledge of the discourse community and its histories, debates and concerns. Furthermore, when the article is published the discourse community sees it not simply as an upstart contribution, but emanating from deep engagement and commitment, an 'insider' contribution.

Extracts from:

Thomson, P. & Kanter, B. (2013)

Writing for Peer Reviewed Journals.

London & New York: Routledge.

(3) it allows us to assign times to the various parts of the paper

The abstract in Figure 5.1 is divided into seven writing tasks. Some are bigger than others, but none is likely to take more than a solid day's work and most will take less than this. Each piece can be written as a separate and discrete 'chunk'. We know, therefore, that we need seven bits of writing time in order to complete a first draft. We also know how the argument goes because the abstract works to keep us on track. We don't lose sight of where we are going, even if we have to take weeks between sections, because we have a road map in front of us. Finally

(4) we can use the abstract to rework our ideas as we go along.

As we write we sometimes find that we start to say something different than we had originally planned in the abstract. This is perfectly normal and nothing to worry about. It happens because writing is thinking, and as we work with our data we may well see things that we weren't aware of at the start. If this happens, it is helpful to go back and rework the abstract and the word lengths. The abstract becomes an iterative planning document which clarifies how the argument goes. It helps us to be coherent and logical. So, rather than give up the abstract if there is a change of direction, the abstract tool can be easily adjusted and adapted to manage the change.

Once a plan for the paper has been developed, there is still the problem of that pesky empty screen. The introduction still needs to be actually written.

Creating a Research Space (CARS)

We have found that the strategy known as CARS (Create a Research Space) is helpful in getting clear about the work that the introduction must do. Getting clear is preparatory to writing those first few sentences.

We argued in Chapter 3 that every journal abstract needs to start with locational work. This is also the specific requirement of an introduction. The locational work in the introduction must first establish the warrant for the paper in either policy, practice and/or scholarship. The warrant, or mandate as it is sometimes called, is a statement which provides a rationale for a particular contribution to knowledge. Second, the introduction must also explain how the paper will address the issue, and indicate how the argument in the article will proceed. The introduction thus not only establishes the need for the paper, but also makes it clear that if the reader engages with the paper they will find the answer to the question or problem that has been identified.

<p>LOCATE: Bullying is a serious problem in schools.</p> <p>FOCUS: This paper reports on a project in which the authors worked with a group of secondary students in an innovative school in the north of England to research issues of bullying and safety.</p> <p>ANCHOR: The student researchers used photographs to stimulate conversations with focus groups of their peers.</p> <p>REPORT: The data showed that while there was little serious bullying in the school, there was an everyday practice of name-calling, isolation, and physical hassling associated with the formation and maintenance of a hierarchy of sub-cultural groupings in the school.</p> <p>ARGUE: The students' research not only challenges the notion of bullying as necessarily involving a perpetrator and victim, but also offers a lens through which to examine the imbrication of educational differentiation via setting, testing and choice with youth identification practices. It is suggested that this project also has implications for the ways in which one understands and works for inclusion.</p> <p>Argument about the significance of the findings, viz. disjuncture with prevailing policy approach</p>	<p>Introduction located in current national and international policy context (500 words)</p> <p>Expand to 100 words</p>
<p>REPORT: The data showed that while there was little serious bullying in the school, there was an everyday practice of name-calling, isolation, and physical hassling associated with the formation and maintenance of a hierarchy of sub-cultural groupings in the school.</p>	<p>Description of the site of study (500 words)</p> <p>Account of methodology - trigger photographs located in the visual research literatures (1,000 words)</p>
<p>ARGUE: The students' research not only challenges the notion of bullying as necessarily involving a perpetrator and victim, but also offers a lens through which to examine the imbrication of educational differentiation via setting, testing and choice with youth identification practices. It is suggested that this project also has implications for the ways in which one understands and works for inclusion.</p>	<p>Report of major findings - description of thematised findings moving to analysis (2,000 words)</p>
<p>ARGUE: The students' research not only challenges the notion of bullying as necessarily involving a perpetrator and victim, but also offers a lens through which to examine the imbrication of educational differentiation via setting, testing and choice with youth identification practices. It is suggested that this project also has implications for the ways in which one understands and works for inclusion.</p>	<p>Theorisation of inclusion, reference to broader literatures on school sorting and selecting (1,000 words)</p>
<p>Argument about the significance of the findings, viz. disjuncture with prevailing policy approach</p>	<p>Elaboration of some implications for research and practice (1,500 words)</p>

Figure 5.1 The abstract becomes the road map

4

Sentence skeletons

To help writers achieve a more authoritative stance in their introductions we use a strategy which we called *syncretic borrowing* in our previous book (Kamler and Thomson, 2006). Here we re-introduce it because of its power to model new ways of writing, but we rename the strategy sentence skeleton, based on Swales and Feak's (1994) work.

The idea is to select a passage of good writing from the introduction of a published journal article and delete the content. What remains is the skeleton of rhetorical moves made by the author of the article. The skeleton creates a linguistic frame that other writers can emulate and play with.

To illustrate, Figure 5.6 represents the skeleton exhumed from an introduction written by Lavie (2006) for the *Education Administration Quarterly*. What this skeleton makes explicit, linguistically, is how the writer builds connection with the field and structures his article. In workshops we ask writers to insert the details of their own research into skeletons we provide. We see this as linguistic identity work, a way of early scholars writing themselves into an authoritative stance they may not be able to take alone. Removing the content makes syntax visible; it is not plagiarism. It makes explicit the ways of arguing and locating used in particular discourse communities.

In this article, I discuss the main arguments that deal with the issue of _____

In distinguishing between _____ it is my purpose to highlight _____ by pointing to _____

_____. Besides providing a map of the _____

_____, I assess the extent to which these _____.

The _____.

lay a groundwork for _____.

article is structured as follows. After giving an overview of the scope of the _____, I review the particular _____.

Next, I provide a summary of _____.

Finally, in the last two sections, I consider several implications derived from _____

_____ and argue that _____.

Figure 5.6 Sentence skeleton (Lavie, 2006)

The writing of Rajee, a PhD student in aeronautical engineering, demonstrates the potential impact of this exercise. Rajee had previously submitted a paper to an international conference documenting a new application of software she had developed to optimise lighter production of aircraft wing structure. While her reviewers gave her minimal, unhelpful commentary (for a more detailed discussion of this review process see Kamler, 2010), she was invited to revise and resubmit. To help Rajee develop a clearer sense of the significance of her project, she used the sentence skeleton from Lavie (2006) set out in Figure 5.6, which she found extremely useful, although it came from a discipline far outside her field. The bold text in Figure 5.7 designates the language of Lavie's (2006) sentence skeleton; the italics are Rajee's language.

In this article, I discuss the main arguments that deal with the optimisation of Finite Element Models (FEM). In distinguishing between optimised and non-optimised structures, it is my purpose to highlight the advantages of an optimised structure by pointing to weight and cost reductions. Besides providing a map of the methodologies used, I assess the extent to which these techniques lay groundwork to improve the structure. The article is structured as follows. After giving an overview of the scope of shape optimization, I review the mathematical background of the optimization process. Next I provide a summary of the ReSHAPE software, including the two sections, I consider the approach to analysis and results derived from the FEM which is optimised with ReSHAPE and argue that the optimised structure is lighter and more efficient than the non-optimised structure.

Figure 5.7 Rajee works with Lavie's sentence skeleton

Lavie's syntax helped Rajee find more authoritative language for situating her own research. She, in effect, stood in the shoes of a more expert writer and adopted their discursive stance. Rajee did not simply insert this exercise into her revised article, but it did help her learn how to argue for the distinctiveness of her contribution. It allowed her to make this more confident assertion in her final draft: 'Shape optimization enables weight savings as well as long term cost benefits, while ensuring the component is structurally sound and can be commercially manufactured'. It also accomplished significant identity work in positioning her as a more assured scholar in her field of aeronautical engineering.

So what, now what?

We've argued that Tiny Texts can be helpful for planning purposes, but the writer still needs more strategies up their proverbial sleeve in order to do the