Composing an Abstract

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This hand-out is designed to aid seniors submitting their proposals for Senior Symposium at Oberlin College, which takes place on the last Friday of April every year.

The abstract provides readers with a short summary of your research—which, at this point, is likely incomplete. That’s fine. The purpose of the abstract is to generate interest in your work and, in turn, an audience for your presentation. Your audience is likely to be a diverse mix of college students and faculty in your department or program, so your abstract should appeal to a broadly educated set of readers.

I use “composing” here as it refers to “putting together parts or elements,” and good abstract typically include answers—even provisional answers—to the following questions:

• What motivated you to pursue this research question?
  • In all disciplines, gaps in knowledge remain, and your line of research may help fill a gap. In some fields of knowledge, you may imagine that the prevailing model of explanation needs refurbishing, and that’s where your work comes in.

• What is the research question?
  • In The Craft of Inquiry: Theories, Methods, Evidence, sociologist Robert Alford writes:
    “A research question is literally a sentence that ends in a question mark and in which every word counts, one that points in two directions—toward the theoretical framework that justifies the question and toward the empirical evidence that will answer it.”
  • Not all fields, however, agree on the role of theory as suggested here. Talk to your mentor or academic advisor to discuss this proposition.

• What is the method you have selected for gathering evidence?
  • As a rule, there are three types of evidence gathered in academic inquiry: multivariate, historical, and interpretive (see examples below).

• What evidence do you expect to find (or have already found)?

• What conclusions do you expect to draw from your evidence? What do you hope are the wider implications of your findings?
  • If your evidence supports your hypothesis, congratulations. Now tell us what you think it means. If your evidence fails to support a clear answer to your research question, then you may conclude it was a problem with your research question or your method (or something else). Even if your answer is provisional, extrapolate. Tell us what you believe your answer means in the greater scheme of things, and what direction researchers might take in future studies.

Writing a good abstract is a difficult exercise, and may involve multiple drafts. Be patient and persistent, and turn to experienced abstract writers for assistance. Please see the examples below, along with the generic question form for each paradigm. Good luck!
EXAMPLES OF ABSTRACTS

Major: Ethnomusicology (102 words)
Interpretive method—generic question form: How do people make sense of their social worlds?

How do we make sense of the use of the xylophone in Gotye’s “Somebody That I Used to Know,” Billboard’s #1 song of 2012? Using Peircean semiotics, this paper examines sounds and phrases associated with childhood in contemporary Euro-American pop music, ranging from toy instruments to nursery rhymes. What associations evoke “child-ish-ness” for the listener? How is innocence conveyed musically, and to what effect? I examine the ways these invocations adhere to ideas about the child propounded by queer theorists. The role of the child in popular music has remained largely unexplored, but I seek to bring these conversations into ethnomusicological discourse.

Major: Geology (95 words)

Multivariate method—generic question form: What factors explain an outcome? (Or, what independent variables correlate with a dependent variable?)

In this study, we explored the relationship between agricultural land use, drainage tiles, and depth of erosion in the Vermillion River watershed. Land use in the Vermillion watershed is primarily agricultural, and many farmers use drainage tiles to combat clayey and compacted soil. While the effect of drainage tiles on erosion is not well constrained, we can record variations in erosion depth in relation to the percentage of drainage tiles in the different sub-watersheds in our sample. Using short-lived radionuclides, we analyzed the samples for 137Cs and 210Pb and made further inferences using GIS software.

Major: History (104 words)

Historical method—generic question form: What processes lead to events?

This research traces how, at Oberlin College, the reproductive rights movement was first born within the Women’s Liberation movement and later emerged as its own autonomous and free-standing social movement. I use oral histories, archival documents, and student publications to paint a picture of Oberlin women’s activism as a particular representation of American second wave feminism with characteristic motivations, tactics, and goals. From 1960 to 1980, reproductive rights activism formed through discussions of institutional sexism, development of a feminist vocabulary, and evolving sexual mores. Reproductive rights activism existed in dialogue and overlapping membership with campus feminism, but maintained its own constituency, practices, and objectives.


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