

Everything You Wanted To Know About Writing A Research Abstract But Were Too Afraid (*Or Started Too Late*) To Ask

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The scientific abstract program at the national meeting accounts for the largest number of submissions and presentations. Here we present some "Do's" and "Don'ts" for crafting an easily understandable, highly rated abstract.

WRITING THE ABSTRACT: DO'S

The abstract should have four sections: Background, Methods, Results and Conclusions. The Methods and Results sections are the meat of the abstract and should take up 2/3 of the space. Reviewers will only spend a few minutes going over each abstract. Make it easy for them to understand what you did, why, what you found, and what it means. This shouldn't be a mind-reading exercise. If you have done something very different or novel, call attention to it. You should also consider reviewing the structure and content of successful abstracts in your topic area from the past meeting. It may be helpful to review published SGIM abstracts from 2007 in your topic area (See JGIM April 2007 supplement or <http://www.sgim.org/am07/handouts/JGIMSupplement2007.pdf>)

Title: Appropriately catchy is okay and can make your abstract memorable, but avoid being too nutty. The title should be related to the abstract and be descriptive. "Tabloid" titles usually backfire. For example, *Association Between Diuretic Use and Cardiovascular Mortality: a Nested Case-Control Study* is much better than *Dying to Pee: Diuretics Cause Sudden Cardiac Death*.

Background: In a few sentences, clearly state the research question or study aims ("We examined the association between X and Y in persons with Z") and briefly indicate why the question/topic is important.

Methods: Summarize key elements including the study design (randomized trial, prospective cohort, retrospective cohort, cross-sectional), study population/clinical setting, primary predictor and outcome variables, and the main statistical approach.

Results: Begin with a brief description of the study population including the response rate (if applicable). Next report the main finding with words and numbers that make it easy for the reader to understand the result. Don't just list p values. Words describing the relationship, followed by the numbers substantiating the statement work best, (e.g., "Subspecialists ordered twice as generalists" (4.5 v. 2.8, $p < 0.05$). Only choose the most important results. Multivariate analyses should follow univariate ones. Focus more on the final multivariate results (especially if different than the univariate ones), rather than reciting all univariate relationships. Avoid using all words and no numbers and vice versa. Mention if sensitivity (or alternate) analyses altered the principle finding if space allows.

Conclusions: In one or two sentences, indicate what your results mean for clinical care, policy, or future research. Avoid overstating your case or just repeating the main finding. Keep the conclusion focused on the implications of the results presented in the abstract.

Submitting the abstract: First, read and follow the submission instructions. Second, start and finish early. Third, pick a both a primary and secondary category (if appropriate) to describe your abstract (described in detail on the SGIM website). This will help us steer your abstract to the appropriate review committee.

WRITING THE ABSTRACT: DON'TS

Don't submit an abstract without someone else reviewing it first. No matter how smart, senior or polished you are, your abstract will always be better after one or more cycles of pre-submission peer review. To paraphrase the author James Michener, "There are no good writers, only good re-writers."

Avoid Last Minute Abstract Submission Stress Disorder The abstract deadline is January 8, 2007 at midnight Pacific Time, but the on-line submission process opens right around Thanksgiving. Although it is human nature to wait until the last minute, save money (and stress) by submitting by December 21- the submission fee goes up on December 22nd. Plan sufficient time to write, proofread, and submit your abstract BEFORE the deadline. Remember, the closer to the deadline, the harder to get technical assistance and the slower the COS website will be.

Avoid CIATSSs (Contrived Idiosyncratic Abbreviations To Save Space) A few standard abbreviations are fine, assuming you spell them out the first time. However, people sometimes try to sneak under the character limit by "acronymegaly"—excessive use of acronyms. This may fool the computer counting characters, but will make it harder for human reviewers to read your abstract. Anything you can do to make your abstract "easy on the eyes," simple, and straightforward will be to your advantage.

Don't issue "promissory notes". Do not say, "Results will forthcoming" or "discussed more fully..."

Don't "slice the salami." Avoid splitting the main findings into multiple skinny abstracts short on substance if the results are better described in one abstract. Most times a "full sandwich" will better satisfy the reviewers "hunger" and increase the chance of a highly rated abstract.

ADDITIONAL TIPS

Who should submit?

Everyone! The SGIM Annual Meeting is a platform for our members' best work, regardless of seniority. While SGIM has a strong tradition and special sessions that feature the outstanding work of trainees and junior faculty, we encourage all SGIM members to submit their work including mid- and senior-level faculty.

Please submit your abstract to your regional SGIM meeting.

Regional meetings are a great opportunity to disseminate your work and gain experience with oral and poster presentations, especially for trainees and junior faculty. You can submit and present the identical abstract at a regional and national SGIM meeting.

What about other national meetings?

Can generalist researchers working in a particular specialty present their findings at SGIM and at a subspecialty society meeting? The answer is, "It depends, but probably yes." First carefully check the rules governing abstract submissions for both organizations. The SGIM eligibility policy (online at www.sgim.org/am08) states that an abstract not be submitted if it has already been published or accepted for publication either in article or abstract form prior to the abstract submission deadline.

Finally, the book, *"Publishing and Presenting Clinical Research"* by SGIM member Warren S. Browner (2nd Edition, Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, 2006), is a great resource.

For more information about the 2008 SGIM Annual Meeting, go to www.sgim.org/am08.