



Thesis writing

Abstracts



UNIVERSITY
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PURPOSE

The abstract section of a thesis should provide a complete outline of the whole text. It tells the reader:

- WHAT the research is about
- WHAT question the research is answering or gap in knowledge the new research fills
- WHY the research was done
- HOW the research was done
- WHAT was found (results)
- SO WHAT (significance and implications)

In some qualitative theses, the abstract might also include a statement of the writer's motivation and perspective. An example of this as part of the HOW (methodology) stage of the abstract is the following short statement which appeared in the abstract of a Masters of Nursing Honours thesis:

... In this research, I use a post-structuralist feminist perspective incorporating Foucault's ideas on power, knowledge, truth and resistance ...

The writer here has used the personal "I". This is still relatively unusual, but relevant and necessary in some contexts where the writer needs to acknowledge the subjective nature of the data, and wants to challenge the idea that any knowledge is objective. In a more traditional thesis, you are more likely to find impersonal wording, such as "This research makes use of x approach to ...".

In any case, the abstract sums up the research and summarises all the various sections of the thesis: the context, aims, methods, results, discussion and conclusion. PhD thesis abstracts are usually one to two pages of double spaced text.

Although the abstract is the first thing readers read, it is the last part of the author's writing process – because you can only finalise the abstract after you have completed writing the rest of your thesis.

