

ABSTRACTS, SUMMARIES, AND CREATIVE STATEMENTS

NOTE: If you would like editorial consultation on producing your abstract, summary or creative statement for the Symposium of Undergraduate Research in Progress, contact Hilton Obenzinger at 3-0330 or obenzinger@stanford.edu.

Abstracts, summaries, and creative statements are all used to present a succinct overview of the nature of a larger work of research, analysis or creative production.

Abstracts appear before research papers in the natural and social sciences (such as in biology and economics).

Summaries are often, although not always, at the beginning of research essays in the humanities (such as literary studies and history).

Creative statements are almost always a part of grant proposals for artistic projects, and occasionally they are incorporated into exhibition displays, gallery brochures, performance programs, and book blurbs. Creative statements are considerably different than abstracts and summaries, so they will be discussed in a separate section below.

Both abstracts and summaries have the task of introducing the reader to all the major goals and results (or intended results) of the project. They concisely describe the objectives and hypotheses, identify the methodologies employed, and present the findings, conclusions, or intended results. The researcher "spills the beans" in natural and social science abstracts, leaving nothing important out, although outcomes and implications sometimes may be stated in general terms. Summaries in humanities are often more general, indicating the nature of the analysis and the implications drawn out in the larger essay.

Abstracts and summaries are very valuable because they make it possible for readers to quickly determine the content of a work and decide if the full text is worth consulting. They are also important tools in electronic searches which are based on key words highlighted in an abstract. Abstracts and summaries are usually written for people within your research's area of specialization, and definitions of technical terms and concepts are assumed. However, for purposes of the Symposium of Undergraduate Research in Progress, you should attempt to broaden your audience to make it comprehensible at least to other people in your discipline. For example, an abstract for research in physics should be accessible to those involved in other sciences; a summary in history should be accessible to those in other fields in the humanities.

Qualities of a Good Abstract or Summary

An abstract or summary uses one or more paragraphs that are concise, coherent, and able to stand alone without the rest of the research paper. They typically follow an introduction/body/conclusion structure. This means they present an introduction with the research purpose and goals, followed by the methodology employed along with a chronology of the work, and end with the results and conclusions. If the results can be represented statistically, only the most important statistics are included. If it is an abstract or summary of research in progress, then hypotheses and expected results are appropriate.

Abstracts and summaries do not offer new information not found in the body of the paper, presenting only a summary of what will be found there. They do not comment or evaluate the research experience – they are not “reviews.” They do not offer extensive background on the nature of what is being investigated (for example, an abstract of research on malaria will not include an extensive description of the disease).

How to Develop an Abstract or Summary

Reread or review your research in order to identify your purpose or thesis, scope, methodologies, results, conclusions and implications or recommendations, if applicable.

After you review your research, write a rough draft without looking at your work, making sure that your purpose or thesis is close to the beginning of the abstract or summary.

In most cases, you will use the past tense to refer to your previous work (unless you are writing an analysis of a literary text, which is in present tense). However, if your research is a work in progress, the future tense may be more appropriate.

Use complete sentences, not fragments.

For science-based research, use scientific names instead of local ones. At the same time, avoid unnecessarily technical terms – write out abbreviations for the first time, for example.

Avoid copying key sentences from your work, and summarize your information in a new way. Be wary of using phrases from your larger work; if you use important phrases, make sure they actually explain things and are not ways to avoid stating concepts.

Be precise and unambiguous.

Copyedit and proofread, and get feedback from colleagues who do similar research and from friends unfamiliar with your work.

Creative Statements

Creative statements generally summarize in one paragraph what you consider to be the most important aspects of your art and the techniques you use to make it. Of course, your painting, literary work, musical composition or other creative work speaks for itself. But a creative statement helps other people to better understand your work by letting them know what you do, why you do it, and or how you do it. It is not a manifesto on your artistic stance, but it should reflect your philosophy for approaching the creative task. It does not need to be comprehensive, but it should identify conceptual, emotional or social themes important to your work.

If a literary work, you may summarize plot or theme; if a visual work, you may note elements of composition or medium; if performance (or film, cinema, dance, etc.), you may want to identify social or other issues you seek to address. Obviously, the range of creative media and approaches is very broad, so it is hard to offer one approach for such a statement.

If you work in fields involving non-verbal expression you may not be used to describing your work, so you may need to experiment with different approaches. For example, you may use a variety of writing techniques for your statement – free-writing, narrative of creative process, description of the work. Don't be afraid to experiment. Of course, the creative statement, while "creative," is not yet another artistic work but a tool to help others approach your production. Keep it simple, direct, and eloquent – and show it to fellow artists, friends, and faculty for feedback.

Hilton Obenzinger