

Developing Academic Skills

Submitting an Abstract

Seminar Materials for Young Academics

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Apart from the granting of degrees, the pace of professional academic life is, to a large extent, set by the attendance of conferences where knowledge is shared and potentially useful contacts are made. The submission of abstracts is an essential part of this process, no less than of other aspects of academia. With that in mind, my department (the Department of Anglo-American Studies at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities) together with my research centre (CETAPS – the Centre for English, Translation and Anglo-Portuguese Studies) at the University of Porto have decided to offer specific instruction to MA and PhD students. Having been asked to teach such a seminar, I was surprised by how seldom or inadequately abstracts are dealt with in studies in the field of English for Special Purposes and coursebooks of Academic English. The primer *English for Academics: A Communication Skills Course for Tutors, Lecturers and PhD Students*, published jointly by the British Council and Cambridge University Press, for instance, offers a unit under the heading “Writing an Abstract” (2014: 147-154), but most of the exercises fall below the level of linguistic competence as well of intellectual sophistication one would expect of postgraduate students, let alone of “lecturers”. And in an otherwise useful guide to academic writing, Eric Hayot (2014: 8-9) only mentions abstracts once, anecdotally, as it were, and not in order to explain what they are or to give advice.

I therefore decided to make my own materials in a manner I hoped would prove more suitable for postgraduate students in the Humanities, mainly but not exclusively targeting students in the field of Literary Studies. The following materials have been applied and tested in the academic years 2015-16 and 2016-17. They are intended to be given to the seminar participants as hand-outs, to serve as a basis for discussion and training. They mean to offer practical advice, but obviously not a recipe.

For copyright reasons, I have resorted to the call for papers of a conference organized by my own research centre in November 2015. I have also included the abstracts of papers by Dr Andrzej Kowalczyk (**Maria Curie-Skłodowska University**, Lublin, Poland) and Dr Ana Rull Suárez (Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia, Madrid, Spain), whose permission to publish I wish to acknowledge. I likewise wish to express my gratitude to Professor Rui Carvalho Homem, the co-ordinator of the Relational Forms research group.

1. Introduction

Abstracts are commonly required in several different contexts:

1. when you wish to take part in a conference – in answer to a call for papers;

2. when you wish to contribute to a collection or journal – often in answer to a call for contributions (e.g. when a special issue of a journal is being planned);
3. when you wish to submit a publication proposal (monograph, collection of essays, critical edition) to a publishing-house;
4. when you are applying for support to attend a conference;
5. when you are trying to be accepted on a degree and have to provide the rationale for your future dissertation;
6. when you are submitting a research project for funding;
7. when you are running for the position of research assistant to a project in which you have to show what specific contribution you will be able to make;
8. when you are asked to produce a summary of a piece which you have already written, whether it is an article, a book chapter or a book.

This seminar is focused on writing an abstract for a conference (situation 1 above) but many of the problems addressed and many of the criteria mentioned below also apply to other situations. In fact, some of the issues raised have to do with academic literacy skills generally: how to write adequately, how to refer to sources and the work of other scholars, etc.

An abstract may look like a small thing, but, as the list above already indicates, it is a stepping-stone to much that is crucial in academic life. The importance of writing an adequate abstract should not be underestimated. As Ken Hyland points out:

The challenges of writing for publication are [...] considerable in today's competitive climate where it is not unusual for journals in some fields to receive ten times more submissions than they can use. Moreover, for writers it not only involves developing the research craft skills and "ways of knowing" of a discipline, but also control of its specialized discourse conventions. A paper will only find its way to publication if it frames ideas and employs forms of argument that readers are likely to find familiar. (Hyland, 2009: 85)

This dossier is designed with the aim of raising awareness of some of the issues involved in producing an abstract. You will find advice and exercises. Authentic and pedagogical materials are either included or referred to.

2. Principles and criteria

While a variety of strategies is theoretically appropriate for writing an abstract, the following points ought to be kept in mind:

- The clarity and credibility of the message should be your main aim. Clarity and credibility usually go hand in hand, as scientific merit and rhetorical adequacy cannot survive without each other. The issues raised in the

following paragraphs can be seen as mere particularizations of this general point.

- Read the call for papers carefully. Make sure you specifically address at least some of the proposed goals and stated expectations of the conference organizers as far as topic and methodology/approach are concerned. (If you are submitting an abstract for a publication, anticipate editorial expectations by checking back issues and the editorial guidelines of journals and book series.)
- Remember you are only allowed to use so many words (the call for papers will tell you how many – requirements vary widely). Respect the word limit. Aim for brevity as well as clarity. Avoid repetition. Do not overdo quotations, as you will have to be highly selective. You must include the main points, but be prepared to leave out most of the details.
- Try to establish the relevance of your work. Before starting your abstract, ask yourself which are the high priority aspects of your research. Ask yourself why other scholars would want to listen to your paper or read it when it is eventually published. In other words, what does your work have to offer, and to whom? Make sure you include such claims in your abstract.
- In addition to claims for relevance (which ought to be stated cautiously – see below), *as far as possible* do not neglect to include the following data in your abstract:
 - the object/scope of the research – what it is about; the main topic and subtopics;
 - the aims of the research – what it seeks to establish, find out or demonstrate (and perhaps refute); what points you intend to make;
 - an outline of the argument – how you intend to show what you want to show;
 - the approach you have chosen – theoretical, comparative, historical, etc. Should you have a clearly recognizable interpretive stance or a special field of interest, you may declare yourself as a practitioner of New Historicism, Marxist criticism, Semiotics, Deconstruction, Linguistics, Gender Studies, Translation Studies, Utopian Studies, etc.; or, alternatively, a follower of Mikhail Bakhtin or Northrop Frye or Jacques Derrida, etc. Labels of (sub)disciplinary or methodological affiliation may feel uncomfortable, but some scholars adopt them wholeheartedly – so it is up to you to decide;
 - your relationship to prior literature in the field, i.e. the state of the art; refer to works from which you have learned something important, or the methodology of which you intend to apply to your object, or with whose findings and/or assumptions you disagree.
- The abstract should read *as a text* – more than a simple assemblage of independent utterances. Cohesion and coherence depend on clearly

stating the essential information as well as on using appropriate logical connectors such as “however” and “therefore”, “on the one hand” and “on the other hand”, and otherwise making the line of reasoning explicit by drawing inferences, exemplifying and summarizing (“this shows that”, “for instance”, “to conclude”).

- Modulate your utterances by using hedged propositions. Carefully discriminate between the appropriate levels of certainty: make sure that facts are treated differently from opinions, and make it obvious that some claims are more likely or probable or credible than others; where appropriate, use tentative phrases such as “I wish to suggest that”, “it is possible to infer that”, “it is likely that”, “it is probable that”, “this could mean that”, “to my knowledge”, “as far as can be established”, “it appears”, “apparently”, etc.
- As for style, make sure you use a suitable degree of formality, as regards both syntax and vocabulary. Use the appropriate academic jargon for your discipline and/or approach or methodology.
- Similarly, you should show a proper understanding of relevant concepts in your field of inquiry. As a rule, however, this does not mean that you need to provide definitions of such concepts in your abstract.
- Double-check all facts. Do not make mistakes regarding book titles and dates of publication, biographical and historical events, etc. Lack of factual accuracy will seriously compromise your proposal.
- Some (though by no means all) conference organizers expect you to provide bibliographical references in a formal way, i.e. as a list of entries at the end of your abstract. Others don't. Once again, check the call for papers and/or inquire what is the standard practice in your field.

In brief, you should pay attention to content (including the hierarchy of topics and/or subtopics), logic, organization and style.

Once you have written your abstract, you can test it against these criteria or ask a fellow-student or fellow-scholar to do it for you. This often helps, especially when it comes to assessing how *clear* and *logical* the abstract is. (Sometimes an educated person who is not specifically trained in your academic field may provide even more acute criticism as to what is not clearly expressed. A non-expert reader is often capable of spotting mental shortcuts and unstated assumptions that may need to be verified and/or fleshed out.)

3. Some additional tips

- The title of your paper – although not formally a part of the abstract – is a central element. Papers in the Humanities often have a title followed by a subtitle (in English, linked by a colon). It makes sense to balance the information on both sides of the colon in such a way that the title and the subtitle complement each other without either being too long.

- Note that it is relatively unusual to phrase titles as propositions (“Shakespeare Did not Write *Hamlet*”) or direct questions (“Did Milton Read Bede?”).
- Titles and abstracts are very often supplemented by keywords (check the call for papers). It is advisable to select keywords that figure in the abstract – or, to put it the other way around, to include the keywords in the abstract.
 - Keywords give clues to conference organizers as to the contents of your proposal and may help them organize the conference programme. But there is more. Keywords are especially useful when it comes to indexing publications in searchable databases. A good set of keywords will help other scholars find your work – which means you will increase your chances of being read.
- There is obviously a difference between producing the abstract of a completed piece of research and producing an abstract in advance, sometimes quite a number of months before the time of a conference. If in the latter situation, remember: you are only bound by your abstract to a certain extent. Between the submission of an abstract and the actual conference, your research may develop in unexpected ways. If it does, do not discard new findings and ideas just because they are new (that would amount to a denial of what science is all about). This does not mean, however, that you should rely on guesswork when working on your abstract. Write it as carefully, as exactly and as realistically as possible. And, if need be, ask the conference organizers if it is possible to submit a revised version of your abstract.
- Be willing to revise. Make the most of the feedback from referees and conference organizers: failed submission should lead to successful resubmission. (Circumstances vary, of course. Rejection is likely to happen more often in some fields than in others, and it definitely happens more frequently in the case of publications than conferences. But never cease to be willing to learn – and do not give up.)
- You are writing for your peers: you need to show that you are one of them, but beware of trying to show off. You will not impress your readers by unwarranted oversophistication, presumption or pose. Give them credit: they are intelligent and experienced scholars.
- Conference organizers invariably request a bionote to be sent along with the paper proposal. As with the abstract, respect the stated word limit. State your interests and current projects. Mention relevant publications. You may want to name the institution which granted your most recent degree. Do not forget to mention your current affiliation.
- Let the conference organizers know if you intend to use audio, visual or audiovisual material.

4. Exercises

Do the following exercises.

a) Consider the Penn State University Press “Abstract Submission Guide” at <http://www.psupress.org/Journals/Journal%20PDFs/PSUPJ_Abstract_Guide.pdf>. Write an appropriate abstract for Penn State University Press.

Do the same for the *Relational Forms III* conference (you will find the call for papers in the Appendix below).

b) Deliberately write a *bad* abstract for Penn State University Press. Do the same for the *Relational Forms III* conference. Then swap those abstracts with a colleague’s. You should point out what is wrong as regards style, clarity, factual and conceptual accuracy, structure, etc. Do the work of a reviewer: send the abstract back with instructions on how it ought to be reformulated.

c) Search on-line for past conferences in your chosen field. Collect a random sample of abstracts. Then analyse the features that make up those abstracts. How do authors define their problem or object of study? How do they outline their methodology or approach? Do they apply or challenge a given critical perspective? Do they present results, provide examples or refer to sources? Finally, which of the abstracts do you find most convincing? Why?

d) These are actual abstracts that have been sent to *Relational Forms II*, but the order of the sentences has been changed. Try to put them back together so as to make up two coherent, persuasive abstracts (pay attention to connectors – they are likely to provide important clues). After completing that task, critically assess the suitability of the abstracts. Is there room for improvement?

Now check your findings against your colleagues’. Is it possible to assemble the abstracts back in more than one way? If so, how is one way better than another?

ABSTRACT 1

An Ironic Representation of Science in Marcin Wolski’s *Laboratory No 8* (Andrzej Kowalczyk)

As the action progresses, it turns out that there is another cosmic intelligence conveying experiments on the both races. . .

The paper examines the dystopian novel *Laboratory No 8* written in the late 1970s by Marcin Wolski (1947-), Polish radio and television satirist, columnist, and science-fiction author.

I intend to focus upon the major objects of irony in Wolski’s text: man’s unshaken belief in science and the resulting position of superiority over other species; a scientific, materialistic outlook on the universe; moral/ethical aspects of experimenting upon other species in the name of scientific development; the conflict between science and art, communicated through the novel’s sub-plot in which a human writer describes for posterity the history of our race’s demise; as well as on a more satirical aspect of Wolski’s dystopia, visible particularly clearly from the present-day perspective: the ideologization of science in a communist country.

The methodological propositions I intend to use in my paper include those by C. Colebrook and S. Sławiński (irony) and L. T. Sargent, T. Moylan and A. Zgorzelski (dystopia and SF).

The novel presents the post-apocalyptic society of intelligent rats conducting experiments on miniature human beings, dwarfed as a result of a nuclear cataclysm.

ABSTRACT 2

Scientific Expression in Thomas Pynchon's Work (Ana Rull Suárez)

I shall contextualize this by showing how the narrative takes place at the end of the 19th century when some of the most important scientific and technological developments were taking place in the Western world.

That is to say, Pynchon shows how experiments with light and energy led to the construction of armaments for the First World War which, instead of improving human life, brought about mass death and destruction.

I shall argue that *Against the Day* is an example of how Pynchon uses various scientific, technical and mathematical elements to create a plot with profound implications but which is not resolved in a tragic way thanks to the postmodern irony he employs throughout the novel.

On the one hand, he reflects the hope of those people who lived through great scientific discoveries, such as those associated with electromagnetism, the search for the means to produce energy, and experiments in diverting aether, etc. and, on the other, he also explores the threats these discoveries pose for the 19th and 20th centuries in the form of weapons and machines for mass destruction.

In this way he shows both the possible marvelous effects of science that precede modern means of communication (wireless, electricity, air balloons, trains, etc.) and registers a sense of disappointment towards science in a world that is falling apart.

In this paper I shall consider how light is used in Thomas Pynchon's *Against the Day*.

The main aim of this paper is to show how Pynchon explores the scientific world of the 19th century from an ironic postmodern point of view.

In the novel, light can be considered as a positive symbol for the future of human communication but also as a negative sign of questionable uses of science.

Appendix

Relational Forms III Imagining Europe: Wars, Territories, Identities Representations in Literature and the Arts 19-20 November 2015

An international conference hosted by the Faculty of Arts and Humanities
University of Porto, Portugal

This conference is directly prompted by a commemoration: the bicentennial of the battle of Waterloo. It is a commonplace to state that the events of June 1815 proved a

watershed in European history, redrawing the map of the continent and much of what came in its wake. We want to consider this, however, alongside *other* instances of conflict that have proved momentous in European history, including other 'fifteens' prior to Waterloo – e.g. Agincourt and Ceuta (1415), the 1st Jacobite rising (1715); and, crucially, the conference will focus on the imaginative consequences of such events, especially in literature and the arts.

In sum: the conference avails itself of a commemorative design to consider the consequences that a history of conflict(s) in Europe has had, within imaginative production, for an ongoing refashioning of perceived identities. We want to showcase and discuss the impact of such processes on literary and artistic representations, preferably from a comparatist perspective.

As indicated by the number in its title, this conference is the third in a series of academic events that reflect the ongoing concerns of the eponymous research group (*Relational Forms*), based at CETAPS (the Centre for English, Translation and Anglo-Portuguese Studies).

The organisers will welcome **proposals for 20-minute papers in English** responding to the above. Suggested (merely indicative) topics include:

- Europe, conflict and the imagination
- terrible beauties: European wars in literature and the arts
- rout and road: narratives of disaster and displacement
- poetry and battlefields, self and community
- reviewing the massacre: verbal and visual reenactments of war scenarios
- conflict, identity, translation: representations across media / across languages
- drama, war and Europe: 'a nation thinking in public...'
- shooting Europe: film, war and memory

Submissions should be sent by email to relational@letras.up.pt

Please include the following information with your proposal:

- the full title of your paper;
- a 250-300 word description of your paper;
- your name, postal address and e-mail address;
- your institutional affiliation and position;
- a short bionote;
- AV requirements (if any)

References

- English for Academics: A Communication Skills Course for Tutors, Lecturers and PhD Students* (2014). Cambridge: British Council / Cambridge University Press.
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