

## How to Write a Successful Abstract

by Angela Blood, U of Chicago

It's that time of year again! With the call for next year's annual meeting abstracts already announced it's time to think about submitting your work. Each year, as the abstract call is announced, the publications committee likes to remind new and returning ASPE members about some of the fundamental elements of a well written abstract. While every venue (professional society, journal, or grant) highlights different qualities, and while each type of submission (presentation, workshop, poster, research abstract) is unique, there are some basic tenants that are true for all successful abstracts.

*Read submission instructions carefully.* The guidelines for ASPE submissions can be found at <http://precis2.preciscentral.com/Link.aspx?ID=8881CD31DDAF67EF> . Make sure to observe all the submission guidelines including word count limits, formatting, content parameters, and blinding. Ensure that spelling and grammar are accurate before you finalize your submission.

At ASPE, submission categories include:

- Oral Research Presentations
- Posters
- Presentation/Discussions
- Training Techniques
- Workshops
- Snapshots

**Please refer to the instructions on the submissions website for specifics about each category.**

*Choose your topic wisely.* In choosing your topic, think about kinds of abstracts will be relevant to attendees. Certain hot topics in the field may be of particular interest. For example, new requirements for licensure or certification may make abstracts regarding assessment more desirable in a certain year. At the same time, the work that you are doing on a daily basis may also be relevant for attendees. Also, there are three different levels of difficulty for workshops - novice, veteran and general audience - so do not feel that your idea is too basic. Chances are, there are other colleagues who may find it helpful.

*Know your stuff.* Choose something that you know well and are genuinely interested in. Familiarize yourself with other literature related to your topic, and know how your work fits into the bigger picture – include a sentence or two about this in your introduction. Reviewers will be asking themselves, “Why is this important for attendees?”; “How does this help to inform or advance the field?”

Reviewers looking at the following criteria when screening the abstracts:

- ⤴ Blinded
- ⤴ Relevant
- ⤴ Comprehensive
- ⤴ Clear
- ⤴ Organized
- ⤴ Accurate and Achievable Format

*Practice.* Condensing your work into a tight word limit is a skill. Start drafting your abstract well before the submission deadline. With a limited word count, you need to make every sentence carry meaning. It may take multiple drafts to focus it appropriately and remove redundancy. If there are internal meetings or calls-for-abstracts at your institution, try a draft of your abstract there – you can capitalize on the feedback you receive to make the abstract even stronger for a larger venue.

*Get help.* Ask a mentor, especially someone familiar with ASPE submissions, to review your draft before you submit

While research abstracts and descriptive abstracts differ slightly in their formatting, the major sections of your abstract will generally include:

- Title
- Authors
- Introduction
- Methods or description
- Results or outcomes
- Conclusions

Some tips to consider from experienced abstract writers include:

- BLIND the abstract. There is information about how to do this in the call for abstracts. ASPE may reject the abstract if it is non-blinded so don't forget this important step.
- Write the title last when the overall concept of the abstract is clear to you.
- Read abstracts that have been accepted in the past to get ideas about approaches. Many examples can be found in this month's edition of ASPE News.

- Capture the reader with the first sentence – create tension with a startling fact or innovation.
- Link all the sections of the abstract together. For example, in an oral research presentation, all the methods should be tied to results and vice-versa. Do not discuss results you could not have found without the methods you described, and do not discuss methods that produced no results. Save the interpretation of your results for the conclusion section.
- Make sure the abstract can stand on its own. *Do not* state that “the potential reasons for these findings or for this innovation will be discussed during the presentation.” If you cannot summarize or interpret your findings or describe your innovation adequately in the abstract, you either need better clarification or you have too much information.
- Be careful not to over-reach. For an oral research presentation, make sure your conclusions are justified with the methods and results that you have. For other categories make sure that your session objectives are doable within the time limit.
- End your abstract with some direction for the future. What will you do, or what should the field do? In research abstracts, save the interpretation of your results for discussion or conclusion sections. Conclusion is that is the language of our call
- If appropriate, state that your work was vetted by your institutional review board (IRB).
- Use an active voice “our goal...” rather than “The goal was ...”

Finally, *recognize the work of others*. Include all those who contributed substantially to the work or writing in your authorship. You will be known as someone who gives credit where credit is due. Make sure everyone who is listed as an author reads the abstract before you submit.