WEEK 3
Abstracting Your Article

Task Day	Week 3 Daily Writing Tasks	Estimated Task Time in Minutes	
		HumInt	SciOua
Day 1 (Monday?)	Read from here until you reach the week 3, day 2 tasks, filling in any boxes, checking off any forms, and answering any questions as you read.	60	60
Day 2 (Tuesday?)	Read others' strong abstracts, and draft your own abstract.	120+	90
Day 3 (Wednesday?)	Find and study one (or two) strong article(s) in your field.	120+	90+
Day 4 (Thursday?)	Find and study articles to cite in your article.	120+	90+
Day 5 (Friday?)	Get a colleague's feedback on your abstract; revise your abstract accordingly.	60	60
Total estimated time for reading the workbook, completing the tasks, and writing your article		**8+ hours**	**5.5+ hours**

Above are the tasks for your third week. Make sure to start this week by scheduling when you will write, and then tracking the time you actually spend writing (using the Calendar for Actual Time Spent Writing This Week form or online software).

Group work. If you're going through the workbook with others (such as in a class or with a partner), work together on the two tasks this week that depend on your talking and exchanging with others. Since they're scheduled for different days, you can decide which task you'll complete on your meeting day.

Individual work. If you're going through the workbook on your own, last week you were to have contacted one or two people whom you trust to provide feedback on days 1 and 5 of this week. If you haven't done that yet, follow the instructions when you get to the day 1 task in this chapter.

WEEK 3, DAY 1: READING AND TASKS

SECOND WEEK IN REVIEW

If you didn't get as much writing done last week as you hoped, join the club. Very few scholars ever feel that they've done enough. Whether you spent long hours working and don't have much to show for it, or you procrastinated when you had every intention of getting a lot accomplished, avoid feeling guilty and start this new week afresh. After all, you have twelve weeks to get it right! If you managed to fit in fifteen minutes to an hour of academic writing most days—congratulations! You're doing great. If this is the first time you've been writing as a daily practice, you're well on your way to making writing a habit.

No matter what happened with your writing last week, take five minutes now to jot down what you've learned so far about making time for writing. What aided or hindered your writing goals? What were the challenges? What worked? Did you find any solutions? (Remember that you can check out the "Solutions to Common Academic Writing Obstacles" at wendybelcher.com.) What could you continue to do or start doing this week to make time for writing? Was your writing plan for last week realistic or unrealistic? Making this task social helps you absorb these lessons—so email or text someone about what you've learned.

Lessons to Be Learned from My Past Week's Writing Experiences

In the first week, you identified your feelings about the writing experience. You learned what makes for a successful academic writer, and you selected the paper you will work on revising. You set a realistic writing goal. In week 2, you learned the myths about what it takes to get published, and the reality that a publishable research article needs to link the new and the old. Most of all, you focused on what an argument is and why it's essential to your success as an academic writer. Finally, you worked on making a list of revision tasks and revising your article around your argument. In other words, you established where you are, where you want to go, and how to get there. This week, you'll study how to use abstracts to conceptualize your article.

ABSTRACTS AS A TOOL FOR SUCCESS

One of the best early tasks you can undertake to improve your journal article is to write an abstract—something that describes your article's topic and argument. In fact, one scholar published an article about how she dramatically improved her writing productivity after learning from this workbook "to write the abstract first," as the task became "the anchor and catalyst for the framing and reframing of writing goals" (Linder et al. 2014, 223). Unfortunately, many scholars see writing an abstract as the *last* step to publication. In the humanities, they may never have to write one! But writing an abstract, regardless of whether journals in your field require one, is an important step in revising your article, not a mere formality. More than one authority has noted that "a well-prepared abstract can be the most important paragraph in your article" (APA 2010, 26).

Why is writing a good abstract so important?

Solving problems. The act of writing an abstract helps you clarify in your own mind what your article is about. Since an abstract is a miniature version of your article—anywhere from 50 to 400 words, with an average length of 120 words in the social science fields, 150 in the humanities (Lauer-Busch 2014, 48), and 260 in the medical and health sciences—it provides you with the opportunity to distill your ideas and identify the most important ones. It also serves as a diagnostic tool: if you can't write a brief abstract of your article, then your article may lack focus. Finally, it helps you face the problems you'll have to solve in the article itself.

Connecting with editors. Editors who receive a clearly written abstract—allowing them to skim an article—can make quicker and better decisions about whether an article fits their journal's mandates and is worth sending out for peer review. In addition, they can more easily identify the best potential peer reviewers for an article. Or, to put this reality in negative terms, editors often reject an article after reading its abstract alone (Langdon-Neuner 2008, 84). You need to get it right.

Connecting with peer reviewers. When editors ask peer reviewers to indicate their willingness to review an article, most editors attach its title and abstract alone to that email, not the entire article. Thus, your crafting an intriguing abstract is essential to enticing busy scholars to commit to reviewing your article. A weak abstract does the opposite, enabling busy scholars to justify saving their writing time for their own work and refusing to peer-review. Faculty members are neither paid nor obligated by their institutions to write peer reviews, so they do need to be enticed.

Getting found. Most articles are published with abstracts these days, in part because such articles are cited twice as often as those having no abstract (Petherbridge and Cotropia 2014, 23). Most of the time, the abstract is the only part of an article that readers will find online, because most journals place their published articles behind paywalls. Consequently, keywords and proper nouns embedded in your abstract provide an important electronic path to your article for researchers who wouldn't find your work based on its title alone.

Getting read. Your abstract is essential to persuading busy scholars to read your article. It communicates the article's importance and demonstrates whether reading it will add to the scholars' knowledge. It helps potential readers decide whether your methodology is suitable enough or your approach fresh enough to merit the time to read your article instead of the dozens or hundreds of others published on the topic. Your abstract needs to hook the reader, not merely report on your research.

Getting cited. Many readers will never examine more than your abstract—owing to either lack of time and energy or paywalls. In fact, more than one person may cite your article based on reading your abstract alone. (One study estimated that only 20 percent of people who cited an article had read it [Simkin and Roychowdhury 2002].) So, unethical as it sounds, you want to provide an abstract so good that someone could cite your article with accuracy based on that abstract alone. For instance, a scholar writing an article about the efficacy of the women's environmental movement in Senegal may want to state in passing that scholars have published many more articles about the efficacy of a similar movement in Kenya. If your article is about the Kenyan movement, you want that scholar to be able to find and cite your article based solely on your abstract.

INGREDIENTS OF A GOOD ABSTRACT

An abstract is a condensed version of your article, a distillation of its most important information. Common strengths unite good abstracts; common problems plague even published ones. Applied linguists and rhetoricians have studied these strengths, the typical rhetorical "moves" used in a variety of academic genres, including abstracts (Huckin 2001; Swales and Feak 2009, 2010, 2012). Below are some of the main lessons to be gleaned from this diverse research about abstracts. Don't worry; you won't need to memorize these lessons, because there will be a checklist later. For now, just become acquainted with them.

An abstract should

- Summarize the article, not introduce it. Novice authors often write abstracts as if they were introductions. Don't—that's what introductions are for.
- Tell a story. State the puzzle or problem that the article is addressing, rather than giving a barrage of data without an argument or a conclusion.
- State the argument and a claim for the significance of that argument.
- Reveal the most valuable findings. People are more likely to read an article if they know what's most interesting about it up front.
- State methods briefly, in no more than a sentence. Don't let your description of how you conducted the study or developed your theoretical frame take over the abstract.
- Use strong verbs, not vague ones. Instead of "exploring" or "examining" a subject, your abstract "argues" or "demonstrates." Instead of "attempts to" or "tries to," your abstract "shows." (One journal editor told me that if she sees the word *explores* anywhere in an abstract, it's a red flag, suggesting that the article is not argumentative.)
- Include all the most relevant keywords, since many search engines search by abstract and title alone.

- Be a self-contained whole. Don't include anything in the abstract that is not self-explanatory; it should make sense to people in your field without their reading the whole article. (This is often difficult to determine on your own; you need others to read your abstract and tell you whether it passes muster.)
- Report what you did do (the past), not what you hope to do (the future). Your abstract should not read like a plan. It should not include statements like "we hope to prove." Those are okay in grant proposals or conference paper proposals but not in a research article abstract, which is a report on a completed study.

Then, for most (but not all) journals,

- Don't include footnotes.
- Don't include citations.
- Don't include quotations.
- Don't include abbreviations, symbols, or acronyms—instead, spell out all terms.

The following sections provide information about abstracts in different metadisciplines. If you're in the humanities, you could skip to your section; but I recommend that you read the next section, because the SciQua fields provide the most assistance in understanding the basic nature of abstracts.

Good SciQua Abstracts

If you're in the social, health, behavioral, or natural sciences or in certain cases a professional school, you're fortunate to have prescribed formulas for writing journal article abstracts. However, trends in scientific abstracts are always changing—perhaps the now rare "graphical abstract" (a single pictorial summary of the article) or five-minute "audio abstract" will become popular (Hartley 2014). Some journals are even asking authors to articulate the main point of their article in a tweet of just 280 characters as a way of encouraging them "to think about the dissemination of their papers when they submit them" (Else 2015). For now, two abstract formulas are common: structured and unstructured.

Sciqua Structured Abstracts

Many journals in experimental or quantitative fields have now moved to a structured abstract format, in which the journal provides five to eight subheadings that structure the order of and information in the abstract. Researchers have grouped the hundred most common subheadings found in structured abstracts under the five most common subheadings; these five they call metacategories: background, objective, method, results, and discussion/conclusion, in that order (Hartley 2014; Ripple et al. 2011; NLM 2015). Authors must provide a sentence or two for each subheading, which thus ensures that all abstracts omit no basic information. Such abstracts are generally longer than traditional ones, serving as more of a précis. According to research, both authors and readers like structured abstracts, as the standardized pattern makes them

easier to write and read (Hartley 2014). Therefore, journals are increasingly likely to use them.

Even if you aren't in a field that requires structured abstracts, their standardized pattern can aid you in writing a strong abstract. I have yet to find the perfect abstract, but the structured nature of the following one—on the topic of common words in journal article abstracts—makes the article easy to find, easy to read, and easy to cite:

SciQua Structured Abstract Example

Vinkers, Christiaan H., Joeri K. Tijdink, and Willem M. Otte. 2015. "Use of Positive and Negative Words in Scientific PubMed Abstracts between 1974 and 2014: Retrospective Analysis." *British Medical Journal* 351:h6467.

> Objective: To investigate whether language used in science abstracts can skew towards the use of strikingly positive and negative words over time.
>
> Design: Retrospective analysis of all scientific abstracts in PubMed between 1974 and 2014.
>
> Methods: The yearly frequencies of positive, negative, and neutral words (25 preselected words in each category), plus 100 randomly selected words were normalised for the total number of abstracts. Subanalyses included pattern quantification of individual words, specificity for selected high impact journals, and comparison between author affiliations within or outside countries with English as the official majority language. Frequency patterns were compared with 4% of all books ever printed and digitised by use of Google Books Ngram Viewer.
>
> Main outcome measures: Frequencies of positive and negative words in abstracts compared with frequencies of words with a neutral and random connotation, expressed as relative change since 1980.
>
> Results: The absolute frequency of positive words increased from 2.0% (1974–80) to 17.5% (2014), a relative increase of 880% over four decades. All 25 individual positive words contributed to the increase, particularly the words "robust," "novel," "innovative," and "unprecedented," which increased in relative frequency up to 15 000%. Comparable but less pronounced results were obtained when restricting the analysis to selected journals with high impact factors. Authors affiliated to an institute in a non-English speaking country used significantly more positive words. Negative word frequencies increased from 1.3% (1974–80) to 3.2% (2014), a relative increase of 257%. Over the same time period, no apparent increase was found in neutral or random word use, or in the frequency of positive word use in published books.
>
> Conclusions: Our lexicographic analysis indicates that scientific abstracts are currently written with more positive and negative words, and provides an insight into the evolution of scientific writing. Apparently, scientists look on the bright side of research results. But whether this perception fits reality should be questioned. (Vinkers, Tijdink, and Otte 2015)

This clear, useful abstract does what it should—provide basic information about why and how the authors conducted their study and what they found.

SciQua Nonstructured Abstracts

So let's say you're in a social, health, or behavioral science field that doesn't require a structured abstract (or you aren't sure whether the journal to which you will ultimately send your article will require it). How do you go about writing your abstract? Almost no journal with traditional abstracts will allow you a three-hundred-word abstract, the length of the structured abstract example above. Yours will have to be shorter. But you can use the metacategories above to write a solid abstract. Let's look at a nonstructured abstract on inequality that exemplifies making each of these metacategory statements. The numbers in the abstract are mine, added at the beginning of each sentence to make my discussion of the abstract easier for you to follow.

SciQua Nonstructured Abstract Example

Snipp, C. Matthew, and Sin Yi Cheung. 2016. "Changes in Racial and Gender Inequality since 1970." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 663 (1): 80–98.

> [1] [In the United States,] the decades following 1970 to the present were an important period because they marked an era in which measures such as Affirmative Action were introduced to improve opportunities for American minorities and women. [2] Ironically, this also was a period when income inequality dramatically increased in the United States. [3] We analyze Census data from 1970 to 2009 to assess whether inequality in the earnings received by women and minorities has changed in this period. [4] We find a complicated set of results. Racial inequalities persist though to a lesser extent than they did four decades earlier. Asian workers in particular have seen improvements and a lessening of inequality relative to White workers. Gender inequality also persists, though more in some groups than others. [5] Overall, the results of this study underscore the persistence of racial and gender inequality in the United States. (Snipp and Cheung 2016)

Note the efficient structure of this 150-word abstract. The first (1) sentence provides background (the United States has been working toward more equity for people of color and women). The second (2) sentence names a puzzle that the article aims to resolve (the incongruous rise in both opportunity and income inequality), and hints at the objective (looking at earnings inequality in the United States by race and gender). The third (3) sentence describes the method (quantitative analysis of census data) and the topic or question of the article (has earnings inequality in the United States by race and gender lessened?). The fourth (4) sentence presents the results (inequality has diminished for some and not for others). The fifth (5) sentence provides the discussion/conclusion (earnings inequality in the United States by race and gender persists).

To get you started on writing an abstract for your social, health, behavioral, or natural science article, jot down some notes (not full sentences; that will come later) for each metacategory in the form on the next page. If you already have an abstract, use this form to test its soundness.

My SciQua Article Abstract Form

Background/problem: State why I embarked on the project—often some reference to a gap or debate in the literature or a real-world situation or problem.

Objective/aim: State what my project/study was intending to figure out; the topic of the article.

Method/design: State how I accomplished the project; name my data and methodology.

Results/findings: State what I found through the project; my findings.

Conclusions/discussion: State what conclusions I drew from the project; my argument (and recommendations, if that is appropriate).

Keywords: List the keywords or search terms that I definitely want to appear in my abstract.

Good HumInt Abstracts

Humanities and interpretive social science journals are less likely to publish abstracts, but abstracts are still a useful tool for thinking through your article and succeeding in the peer-review process. Your challenge is that HumInt abstracts have much less in common with one another than do SciQua abstracts. In other words, HumInt scholars have more latitude in what information they put in their abstract and how they structure it. This freedom can feel onerous if you like formulas. Fortunately, a solid HumInt abstract has some basic ingredients. It should name the subject under discussion, perhaps give a little background, name some evidence, at least hint at the theoretical framework, make a claim for significance, and state the argument. Let's look at an effective published humanities abstract (written by a graduate student) to get a better sense of those ingredients. The numbers in the abstract are mine, added at the beginning of each sentence to make the discussion of the abstract easier for you to follow.

Humint Abstract Example

Schine, Rachel. 2017. "Conceiving the Pre-Modern Black-Arab Hero: On the Gendered Production of Racial Difference in *Sīrat al-amīrah dhāt al-himmah*." *Journal of Arabic Literature* 48 (3): 298–326.

> [1] ʿAbd al-Wahhāb's character in *Sīrat al-amīrah dhāt al-himmah* is but one example of a black hero who figures prominently in a *sīrah shaʿbiyyah*, or popular heroic cycle, the earliest references to which appear in the twelfth century and several of which remain in circulation today. [2] Like several of his counterparts, not only is he black, but he is also alone among his relatives in being so. [3] The explanation supplied in the text of his mother Fāṭimah's eponymous sīrah for his "spontaneous" phenotypic deviation makes use of rhetoric also found in various antecedent and near-contemporary *belles-lettres* sources. [4] Placing ʿAbd al-Wahhāb's case within the context of this literary network illuminates a series of questions concerning the semiotics of race in pre-twelfth-century Arabo-Muslim literature, racially inflected anxieties about control of feminine sexuality, and pre-genetic syntheses of racial and reproductive "sciences." [5] This paper concludes that ʿAbd al-Wahhāb's blackness is produced through a set of scientific and speculative discourses that go beyond the prominent theories of climate influences and Hamitic genealogy, and that posit instead a racial determinacy that occurs spontaneously, regardless of geography or lineage, through a variety of interventions from and against the maternal body. [6] These include the contamination of seminal fluid, "image-imprinting," and divine fiat. [7] The concentration of these theories within a single text makes ʿAbd al-Wahhāb's conception narrative a uniquely apt ground for discussing the broader complex of issues of gender and race in pre-modern Arabic literature.

This is an unusually strong published abstract. The first (1) sentence thoroughly introduces the subject (the text *Sīrat al-amīrah dhāt al-himmah*) and its context, commendably communicating in a short space the text's period, language, and genre (a twelfth-century Arabic language cycle). The second (2) and third (3) sentences specify the evidence under discussion (a black character in this premodern cycle) and the text's intellectual context (its sources and literary network). The fourth (4) sentence gives the theoretical framework (race and gender studies). The fifth (5) sentence declares the argument (blackness in medieval Arabic texts was theorized as due to not climate or genetics but the mother's actions). The sixth (6) sentence provides some specificity regarding the argument (how the mother shapes race). The seventh (7) sentence makes a claim for the significance of the text (it uniquely aids understanding of race and gender in this period). This abstract does everything it should and makes clear the benefit the reader will gain by reading it.

To get you started on writing an abstract for your humanities article, jot down some notes (not full sentences; that will come later) for each guideline in the form on the next page. Don't worry if you leave some parts of this form blank; just put down what you know now.

My HumInt Article Abstract Form

Background/context: Give information about the historical period, the geographic region, the social conditions surrounding the human creations I investigated

Subject: Name the human creations I discussed, their genres, creators, and dates

Claim for significance: Make an announcement about the importance of my subject or my approach to it

Theoretical framework: Suggest the theory I used to discuss the subject, such as feminist or psychoanalytic approaches

Argument: State what my analysis of the subject revealed about the subject, current approaches to the subject, or society

Evidence: Describe my evidence for the argument about the subject, or the elements of the subject I analyzed (e.g., types of textual passages)

Keywords: List the keywords or search terms that I definitely want to appear in my abstract

CRAFTING AN EFFECTIVE ABSTRACT

Day 1 Tasks: Talking Your Way to Clarity about Your Article

On the first day of your third writing week, read this week 3 chapter all the way through until you get to week 3, day 2, answering all the questions posed. Write directly in the boxes provided or in your own document. Also, use the daily writing calendar to schedule your writing time in advance, and then start tracking when you actually wrote.

Your task today aids you in writing a better abstract by helping you attain a clearer sense of audience. Since this is a social assignment, you'll need someone to work with; you were to have set up a meeting with this person last week if you're not meeting automatically in a class or group. A virtual meeting is okay, but emailing or texting won't suffice—you need to talk this through. If the social aspect of this assignment makes you queasy, try to think of the simplest action you could take to satisfy it. Maybe you already discussed the article with someone; if you can recall quite well what you both said about the article, use that in completing the box that follows. Or, if you're having a meal with someone in the next twenty-four hours, describe your article then, even if this person isn't an academic. Or call a friend or a relative and start the conversation by complaining about the assignment; sometimes that can get you over the hump and into the assignment. As a last resort, talk aloud about the article to yourself. The *talking* part is vital.

1. **Describe.** Tell your chosen interlocutor about your article. Start with, "My article is about . . ." or "I am writing . . . ," and follow with a description. Take as much time as you need. Try to give the other person a real sense of your topic, approach, findings, and argument. When you have finished describing the article or idea, ask your listener to relay back to you what they understood you to say, commenting on what was intriguing or unclear. Take notes during this recap, since they can yield improved language for your abstract.
2. **Summarize.** Once your interlocutor has commented, again describe your article, but more succinctly this time. Distill your article into no more than three or four sentences, as if you were giving a brief presentation of your work during an introduction at a conference or chatting in the elevator to an academic you just met.
3. **Write.** Once you've finished summarizing, pick up a pen and use the box below to write one or two sentences starting with "My article is about" or "I am writing." (If you're on the phone with your interlocutor, don't wait to hang up. Do it right then. If you want, you could ask your interlocutor to write down one sentence about your article as well.) The point of the exercise is to get to the clearest, briefest statement of the value and point of the article, and burn off what's not important. It may also help you to sharpen your argument.

What My Article Is About