Tips for Writing Abstracts

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This article provides guidance for the preparation of an effective abstract for submission to the Abstracts Review Committee of the Society for Nutrition Education Annual Meeting. The information should be generalizable to other professional settings as well.

It is critical that nutrition education professionals learn to write effective abstracts, since abstracts are a widely used method of sharing research and program experiences within a professional community. For example, a study may be accepted or rejected for presentation at a meeting, read or not read in a professional journal, and used or not used in the field according to the quality of the abstract. A scientific abstract should provide peers with a clear, concise description of a piece of professional work. In nutrition education, such work may include research, program or curriculum development, program implementation, skill-building workshops, and program evaluation. If you follow the simple guidelines listed below, your abstract should provide reviewers with the information they need to judge the work appropriately.

There are several important choices to be made and five basic rules to follow in preparing an abstract. The first choice is whether your presentation should be part of an oral or poster session, or one of the other venues offered by the organization, if any (presentation category). One is not inherently better than another; however, posters are more appropriate for presentations about methods or developmental projects, since they allow attendees to individually examine tools or collections of educational materials. Oral sessions are more appropriate for reporting the result of an intervention, observation, or outcome of some event. Neither type of session is appropriate for literature reviews.

Another choice is what "type" – research or program description – is most appropriate for your presentation. The criteria for evaluating abstracts in these session types are listed in the "Call for Abstracts." Reviewers will consider whether the research was original and important, whether the design and methods used were appropriate, whether the conclusions were reasonable, and whether the information can be readily used or adapted by others. Reviewers of program description abstracts put emphasis on the relationship of the topic to the theme of the meeting, as well as its general applicability to the field of nutrition education. Choose the category that uses the criteria that best fit the nature of your proposed presentation and its purpose.

The following rules should help you compose an effective abstract:

1. **Follow directions.** This is essential for the efficient handling of all abstracts. Read the "Call for Abstracts" carefully. If you have ideas on how to prepare a new, improved form for submission of abstracts, send them under separate cover to the Abstracts Review Committee chairperson. They may be incorporated into the next year's process. Do not try to "redo" the form with your actual submission.
2. **Meet the deadline.** Exceptions cannot be made; the review process has its own deadlines to meet. Fill in all the blanks on the submission form. Addresses and phone numbers are needed by reviewers and your peers at the meeting. A uniform format also helps to ensure that all abstracts are judged consistently.
3. **Be brief.** Choose a part of your research. Do not attempt to describe an entire project. It will exceed the space limits of the abstract and the time limits of a presentation. Choose a focus and stick to it. To corrupt one of Eble's (1976) famous lines, "Tell less, but tell it better."
4. **Be clear and concise.** Your writing should be succinct, relevant, and to the point. Avoid unnecessary jargon and abbreviations (e.g., X's, O's, BECs) that may not be meaningful to people outside your area of expertise or country. They are distracting to read and hard to interpret. Ask yourself, "Why should anyone care about this work?" and be sure to include the answer in the abstract. Check for spelling errors by reading the abstract backwards. Errors will stand out. When finished, ask someone who is unfamiliar with your work to review your abstract for clarity.

   For a research paper the abstract should contain a sentence about each of the following issues: 1) the problem or purpose addressed by the study; 2) its importance or relevance to the field; 3) the theory, if any, used to guide or structure the research; 4) the design; 5) the major hypotheses, if any; 6) the sample and population; 7) the measures used; 8) the major results; and 9) the major conclusion(s).

   For a program description paper, the abstract should include a sentence about: 1) the purpose or objectives of the program; 2) the need for such a program; 3) the unique characteristics of the program; 4) its basis in prior research; 5) theory or needs assessment, if any; 6) the type of information provided; 7) the target audience addressed; and 8) the evaluation process used, if any.
5. **Be interesting.** A good title is important. Try to avoid a lengthy title, especially if it contains several very long words. Rather, try to capture the essence of your work in a few words and be sure to inform readers of the importance, significance, and applicability of the work in the text. That will attract attention.
6. **Remember, reviewers work on a volunteer basis.** Be respectful of their time and effort as they sort their way through hundreds of abstracts on a very tight time schedule. Cooperate. Consider volunteering to assist with the review process. There is no better way to gain an appreciation for a well-written abstract and an understanding of the types of nutrition education research and activities that are being conducted around the world.

Figure 1 is provided as a summary and checklist. Review your abstract against this checklist before submission. If you can answer yes to every point, then you can be assured that you have "given it your best shot." The procedure is fairly simple, but doing it will is a real skill. Be sure to allow yourself time to draft and revise your abstract several times, and have others review it as well. If you give any less care to the process, you jeopardize your presentation unnecessarily.

Reference:
Eble, K. E. The craft of teaching. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1976.

- ❑ Abstract does not exceed word maximum.
- ❑ Format instructions are followed (title in all caps, name of presenter is underscored).
- ❑ Title is short, understandable, and appealing.
- ❑ Abstract contains information on study or project's purpose, rationale, design, sample size, population, target audience, major results, major conclusions, significance, generalizability, and relation to theme of meeting as appropriate.
- ❑ Abstract Submission Form is completed for each abstract.
- ❑ Presentation category and type are designated.
- ❑ Address is correct and complete, including phone/fax/e-mail.
- ❑ Spelling is correct.
- ❑ Jargon and abbreviations are absent.
- ❑ Mailing instructions are followed.
- ❑ Receipt deadline is met.

Figure 1. Checklist for Abstracts