

C H A P T E R 4

Writing the Abstract

The make-or-break section — structure, keywords, and clarity

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to: (1) Understand why the abstract is the most critical section of your article. (2) Write a structured abstract that covers all five essential components. (3) Select powerful, searchable keywords that increase your article's visibility. (4) Avoid the most common abstract writing mistakes made by EFL/ESL researchers.

4.1 Why the Abstract is the Make-or-Break Section

Of all the sections in a journal article, the abstract carries a responsibility that no other section shares. It must represent your entire study — your purpose, your methods, your findings, and your conclusions — in a space of 150 to 300 words. It is the first thing every editor, reviewer, and reader sees. And in most cases, it is the only thing they read before deciding whether to continue.

Think about your own reading habits as a researcher. When you search for literature on Scopus or Web of Science, you are presented with a list of titles and abstracts. You read the abstract and decide in seconds whether the article is worth reading in full. Your readers do exactly the same with your work.

A poorly written abstract — even for an excellent study — can result in desk rejection, low citation rates, and reduced visibility. A well-crafted abstract, on the other hand, draws readers in, convinces editors to send your article for review, and increases the likelihood of your work being cited by others.

This chapter will teach you exactly how to write an abstract that works hard for your research.

4.2 What Must an Abstract Contain?

A complete and well-structured abstract for a Scopus or Web of Science journal must contain five essential components. These components answer the five fundamental questions that every reader asks when they encounter a new research article:

Component	Question it Answers	Suggested Length
Background	Why was this study needed?	1–2 sentences
Purpose	What did the study aim to do?	1 sentence
Methods	How was the study conducted?	2–3 sentences

Results	What were the key findings?	2–3 sentences
Conclusion	What do the findings mean?	1–2 sentences

4.3 Types of Abstracts

Before writing your abstract, you must check what type of abstract your target journal requires. There are two main types:

4.3.1 Unstructured Abstract

An unstructured abstract is written as a single continuous paragraph of prose. It covers all five components — background, purpose, methods, results and conclusion — without any subheadings. This is the most common type in social sciences, humanities, and ELT journals.

4.3.2 Structured Abstract

A structured abstract uses explicit subheadings such as Background, Objectives, Methods, Results and Conclusions. Each subheading introduces a brief section of the abstract. Structured abstracts are more common in medical, health, and some social science journals. They are easier for readers to scan quickly.

Key Reminder

Always check the author guidelines of your target journal to find out which type of abstract they require. Some journals are very specific about the subheadings they expect. Submitting the wrong type of abstract is a simple but avoidable mistake that signals to the editor that you have not read the guidelines.

4.4 Writing Each Component of the Abstract

4.4.1 Background — Setting the Scene

The background sentences open your abstract by establishing the context and importance of your research. They answer the question: why does this study matter? What problem or gap in knowledge does it address?

Effective background sentences:

- Start with a broad statement about the field or topic that immediately draws the reader in.
- Quickly narrow down to the specific problem, gap, or issue your study addresses.
- Avoid lengthy historical reviews — this is an abstract, not an introduction.
- Use present tense for statements that are generally true in the field.

Example — Background Sentences

"Despite the growing emphasis on research productivity in higher education institutions across sub-Saharan Africa, many university lecturers lack the academic writing skills required to publish in internationally indexed journals. This gap has significant implications for institutional research output and individual career advancement."

4.4.2 Purpose — Stating Your Aim

The purpose statement is the single most important sentence in your abstract. It tells the reader precisely what your study set out to do. It must be specific, clear and unambiguous.

Common phrases used to introduce the purpose statement:

- "This study aims to..."
- "The purpose of this study is to..."
- "This research investigates..."
- "This paper examines..."
- "This study explores the relationship between..."

✓ Example — Purpose Statement

"This study aims to examine the academic writing challenges faced by EFL lecturers at selected universities in Ethiopia and to identify the key factors that hinder their publication in Scopus-indexed journals."

4.4.3 Methods — Describing Your Approach

The methods component tells the reader how you conducted your study. It should be concise but informative enough to give a clear picture of your research design. Avoid technical jargon that general readers may not understand.

In 2 to 3 sentences, cover:

1. The research design — qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods.
2. The participants or data sources — who or what was studied, and how many.
3. The data collection and analysis approach — surveys, interviews, tests, statistical methods.

✓ Example — Methods Description

"A mixed methods design was employed, combining a structured questionnaire administered to 120 EFL lecturers from five universities with semi-structured interviews conducted with 15 purposively selected participants. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics, while qualitative data were subjected to thematic analysis."

4.4.4 Results — Reporting Your Key Findings

The results component is where you report your most significant findings. Many researchers make the mistake of being too vague here — writing general statements like 'the results showed significant differences' without specifying what those differences were. Be specific and concrete.

Principles for writing strong results sentences:

- Report the most important findings — not all findings, just the key ones.
- Use specific numbers, percentages or categories where possible.
- Use past tense — you are reporting what you found.
- Do not interpret the results here — just report them.

✓ Example — Results Statement

"The findings revealed that 78% of participants identified limited academic writing training as the primary barrier to publication. Thematic analysis of interview data identified three major themes: inadequate institutional support, lack of time allocated for research, and insufficient knowledge of journal submission requirements."

4.4.5 Conclusion — Stating the Significance

The conclusion component closes your abstract by explaining what your findings mean and why they matter. It answers the question: so what? What should practitioners, policymakers, or future researchers take away from this study?

A strong conclusion sentence:

- States the main implication or recommendation arising from the findings.
- Connects the findings back to the broader context established in the background.
- Avoids introducing new information not covered in the rest of the abstract.
- Uses present or future tense to signal ongoing relevance.

✓ Example — Conclusion Statement

"These findings suggest that targeted academic writing development programmes, combined with institutional research support structures, are essential for improving publication rates among EFL lecturers in African higher education contexts."

4.5 A Complete Abstract Example

Below is a complete, well-structured abstract that brings all five components together. Read it carefully and notice how each component flows naturally into the next:

Complete Abstract Example

[Background] Publication in internationally indexed journals remains a significant challenge for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) lecturers in sub-Saharan African universities.

[Purpose] This study aims to examine the academic writing challenges faced by EFL lecturers at selected universities in Ethiopia and to identify key factors that hinder their publication in Scopus-indexed journals.

[Methods] A mixed methods design was employed, combining a structured questionnaire administered to 120 EFL lecturers from five universities with semi-structured interviews conducted with 15 purposively selected participants.

[Results] Findings revealed that 78% of participants identified limited academic writing training as the primary barrier to publication. Three major themes emerged: inadequate institutional support, lack of research time, and insufficient knowledge of journal submission requirements.

[Conclusion] These findings suggest that targeted academic writing development programmes, combined with institutional research support structures, are essential for improving publication rates among EFL lecturers in African higher education contexts.

Word Count Note

The complete abstract above is approximately 210 words — well within the 150–300 word range required by most indexed journals. Notice how each component is clearly present yet the abstract reads as a natural, flowing piece of academic prose.

4.6 Choosing Powerful Keywords

Keywords are the terms that search engines and indexing databases like Scopus and Web of Science use to categorise and surface your article in search results. Choosing the right keywords is a strategic decision that directly affects how many researchers find, read, and cite your work.

4.6.1 How Many Keywords Should You Use?

Most journals require between 4 and 8 keywords. Always check the specific journal's author guidelines for their exact requirement. Using too few keywords reduces your article's discoverability; using too many can make the article seem unfocused.

4.6.2 Principles for Selecting Effective Keywords

- **Be searchable:** Use terms that researchers in your field actually search for — think from the reader's perspective.
- **Avoid title repetition:** Do not repeat words already in your title — search engines already index your title automatically.
- **Mix broad and specific:** Include both broad terms (e.g., 'language teaching') and specific terms (e.g., 'task-based instruction in EFL classrooms').
- **Use standard terms:** Use standard terminology from your field rather than invented or informal terms.
- **Study published articles:** Check what keywords are used in similar published articles in your target journal.
- **Use field thesauri:** Consider using terms from established thesauri such as the ERIC Thesaurus for education research.

Example of Weak vs Strong Keywords

WEAK keywords: English, writing, teachers, Africa, study STRONG keywords: academic writing; EFL lecturers; publication barriers; Scopus-indexed journals; higher education; sub-Saharan Africa The strong keywords are specific, searchable, and use standard field terminology. The weak keywords are too generic and would return millions of unrelated results.

4.7 Common Abstract Writing Mistakes

Based on experience reviewing and editing research articles from EFL and ESL researchers, these are the most frequently occurring abstract writing mistakes:

Most Common Abstract Mistakes to Avoid

1. Writing the abstract as an introduction — the abstract must summarise the ENTIRE article including findings.
2. Being too vague about results — 'results were significant' tells the reader nothing. Report specific findings.
3. Exceeding the word limit — always stay within the journal's specified abstract length.
4. Using undefined abbreviations — always write out the full term before using an abbreviation.
5. Writing the abstract before the article is complete — always write the abstract last, after all other sections are finished.
6. Copying sentences from the article body directly into the abstract — the abstract must be written as a standalone piece.
7. Including citations in the abstract — most journals do not permit references in the abstract.

4.8 A Step-by-Step Process for Writing Your Abstract

Many researchers struggle with abstracts because they try to write them first or write them all at once. Here is a proven step-by-step process that makes abstract writing more manageable:

1. Finish writing your complete article first. Never write the abstract before the article is done.
2. Go back to each section of your article and write one sentence that captures its essence.
3. Combine those sentences into a rough draft abstract.
4. Check that all five components — background, purpose, methods, results and conclusion — are present.
5. Revise for clarity, flow and conciseness. Remove unnecessary words.
6. Check the word count against the journal's requirement.
7. Read the abstract aloud — if it sounds unnatural, revise it.
8. Ask a colleague to read the abstract and tell you what they understand the study to be about.

Chapter Summary

- The abstract is the most widely read section of your article — it determines whether editors, reviewers and readers engage with your work.
- A complete abstract contains five components: background, purpose, methods, results and conclusion.
- Always check whether your target journal requires a structured or unstructured abstract.
- Keywords must be searchable, specific, and different from words already in your title.
- Always write the abstract last — after the entire article is complete.
- Avoid vague results statements — be specific about what you found.

- Keep within the word limit specified by the journal — usually 150 to 300 words.

Reflection Questions

1. Take an abstract you have written previously. Does it contain all five components — background, purpose, methods, results and conclusion? Which component is weakest? 2. Count the words in your abstract. Is it within the word limit of your target journal? 3. Look at the keywords you have chosen. Are any of them already in your title? Are they specific enough to attract the right readers?

— End of Chapter 4 —

Next: Chapter 5 — Introduction, Literature Review and Methodology