

Writing Spaces

Assignments & Activities Archive

Unpacking Abstracts: Conventions of Empirical Abstracts in Social Science Papers

Faqryza Ab Latif

This activity guide is a selection from the *Writing Spaces* Assignment and Activity Archive, an open access companion resource to the Writing Spaces open textbook series.

To access additional selections, visit: <http://writingspaces.org/aaa>.

Assignment and activity selections © 2022 by the respective authors. Unless otherwise stated, these works are licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) and are subject to the Writing Spaces Terms of Use. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>, email info@creativecommons.org, or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA. To view the Writing Spaces Terms of Use, visit <http://writingspaces.org/terms-of-use>.

All rights reserved. For permission to reprint, please contact the author(s) of the individual articles, who are the respective copyright owners.

Unpacking Abstracts: Conventions of Empirical Abstracts in Social Science Papers

Faqryza Ab Latif

Overview

The goal of the activity is for learners to be able to describe the components that make up the abstract of an empirical social science paper and apply them to other abstracts in the field. This goal is connected to introducing students to the conventions of an abstract.

For the activity, students will be asked to read the abstract of an assigned article and reflect on the purpose of each sentence in it. The instructor will then introduce the 6 components of an abstract using a color-coded chart, where each color represents a different component. In groups, students will go back to the abstract of the article and identify the sentences that correspond with each component. A follow-up task aimed at assessing students' understanding is to assign different abstracts and have students decompose them.

This activity is suited to take place earlier in the semester for a lower-division social science course, so that students can learn about the conventions of empirical social science articles before being assigned articles to read throughout the semester.

Time Commitment

~60 minutes

Materials

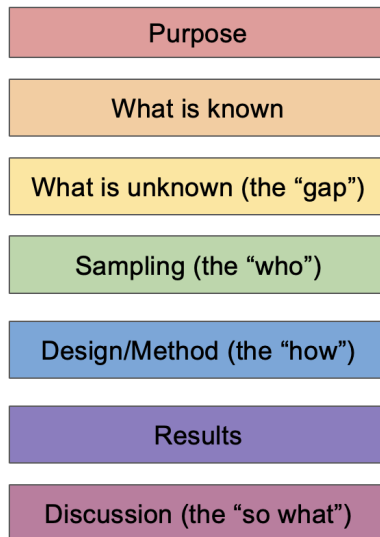
Materials would include an empirical social science article that

students are assigned to read for class, a color-coded chart that the instructor would present during class, shared Google slide files for students to use during their group activity, and an example of an abstract from a paper in a different field, such as humanities or natural sciences. Students would need to bring a device that can connect to the Internet and can allow them to comfortably write.

Activity Process

- Students will bring a digital or hard copy of the assigned article. They will also need to bring a device that can connect to the Internet and can allow them to comfortably write (see Learning Accommodations for other options). They are expected to have done the reading before class.
- In class, students will be divided into four groups to correspond with the four sections of the assigned article: introduction, methods, results, and discussion. In their groups, students will need to discuss what the most important information in their assigned article section is and provide a synthesis of their assigned article section. Their synthesis of each section needs to be provided in one or two sentences. Students will prepare their answers on a shared Google slide file. The instructor will need to have this file of slides prepared before class. Each group will be in charge of one slide. (~10 minutes)
- Next, students will be tasked with discussing their answers to this question: “What do you think is the purpose of each sentence in the abstract?” Students are expected to connect their discussion with the answers they came up with when they were asked to synthesize each article section into one or two sentences. (~ 10 minutes)
- The instructor will then ask one or two students from each group to share their insights. The instructor will summarize

the students' comments and connect them to the chart below. The instructor will need to introduce the components of the chart and explain what they mean. Specifically, they will need to explain that the purpose addresses the research question or the goal of the study, the known and unknown addresses the gap in the existing literature, the sampling describes the “who” or the demographics of the participants in the study, the design or method describes how the study was implemented, the results address the main findings of the study, and the discussion briefly explains the significance or implications of the findings. (~10 minutes)



- After this, students will be asked to go back to the abstract of the assigned article and identify the sentences that correspond with each component (e.g., which sentence represents the “who?”). (~10 minutes)
 - For this portion, students will prepare their answers on a different shared Google slide file. The instructor will

need to have this file of slides prepared before class. Each group will be in charge of one slide. Each slide will have the same abstract. In their groups, students will need to color-code or highlight the abstract on their slide according to the chart (e.g., sentences that represent the purpose will be highlighted in red). The instructor will need to let students know that some sentences might have overlapping components.

- After the group activity, the instructor will go over the slides and see how the groups' answers might differ. If there are fundamental differences that indicate a misunderstanding of the components, the instructor will need to address them. (~ 5 minutes)
- Next, the instructor will show an example of an abstract from a humanities paper or a natural sciences paper. Students will be asked to discuss, in their groups, what the differences are between the example abstract and the abstract from their assigned article. Some question examples would be: What is the purpose of each sentence in the abstract? How does it differ from the abstract in the assigned article? (~ 10 minutes)
- Finally, the instructor will assign a take-home assignment, where students will read the abstract of a different empirical social science paper and identify which sentences in that abstract represent the purpose, what is known or unknown (the "gap"), the sampling (the "who"), the design/method (the "how"), the results, and the discussion (the "so what").

Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this activity will:

- Describe the components that make up an abstract of an

empirical social science paper

- Practice and apply the components to abstracts of other empirical social science papers
- Critically reflect on the differences between the abstract of a social science paper and the abstract of a paper from other fields

Learning Accommodations

- Students may choose two different forms of participation in the group activity, as a discussion leader or note-taker, in order to maximize engagement and accommodate different learning preferences.
- If students do not have suitable devices, then the instructor can use the whiteboards and markers in class instead of Google slides for the group activity.
- Students who have difficulty discerning colors can engage in the color-code activity by copying and pasting the sentences of the abstract into a table, where one column would contain the sentences and another column would contain the corresponding abstract component. An example is shown below:

Component	Sentence(s) from abstract
Purpose	

- This activity can be done in an in-person or a synchronous

online format. In the latter case, instructors would rely on software such as Zoom, where students can be divided into break-out rooms during the group activity.

Further Reading

Devitt, Amy J. "Teaching Critical Genre Awareness." *Genre in a Changing World*, edited by Charles Bazerman et al., Parlor Press, 2009, pp. 341-354.