

SHORT COMMUNICATION

Writing conference abstracts: a guide for Rehabilitation and Assistive Technology practitioners

Emma L. Friesen^{1*}, Trina Phuah² and Elizabeth J. Comino^{1,3}

¹Primary and Community Health Research Unit (PCHRU), South Western Sydney Local Health District, Liverpool, Australia; ²School of Community Health, Charles Sturt University, Albury–Wodonga, Australia;

³Centre for Primary Health Care and Equity (CPHCE), University of New South Wales, Kensington, Australia

Rehabilitation and assistive technology practitioners are often encouraged to disseminate results of research and evaluation activities. Presenting work at conferences is a great way to highlight the work of health practitioners and share experiences with others. Most conferences require potential presenters to submit an abstract through a ‘Call for abstracts’ process. This article presents strategies to plan and write abstracts for conferences. It describes key stages in the process: discussions, drafting using generative questions or structured headings, next steps and a final checklist.

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*Correspondence to: Emma L. Friesen, Primary and Community Health Research Unit (PCHRU), South Western Sydney Local Health District, Locked Bag 7103, Liverpool, NSW 1871, Australia. Email: emma.friesen@uqconnect.edu.au

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Engaging in research and evaluation is important for rehabilitation and assistive technology (R&AT) practitioners (1). Research and evaluation are crucial to strengthening the evidence base underpinning R&AT interventions and service delivery, and for improving patient care (2, 3). A key element of research and evaluation is disseminating findings beyond local teams or departments, and to a wider audience (1–3). Conferences offer an avenue for R&AT practitioners to share the results of research and evaluation activities and to discuss issues affecting R&AT practice.

Conferences vary widely in terms of their aims, scope and target audience. Some focus on academic and large-scale clinical research and may have a highly competitive peer review process. Others focus on ‘real-world’ clinical practice and may be more suited to novice practitioner researchers in R&AT.

Most conferences require potential presenters to submit an abstract through a ‘Call for abstracts’ process. This article presents some strategies to plan, draft and prepare abstracts that are suitable for conferences.

Choosing a topic

A first step is to discuss ideas for the topic or focus of the abstract with possible co-authors and collaborators. There are many types of research and evaluation activities

of interest to R&AT practitioners that may be suitable for a conference presentation. Some examples are:

- 1) Descriptive case studies or case reports that describe specific client presentations or interventions,
- 2) Methodologies and results of small-scale clinical intervention studies, such as those based on the Person–Intervention–Comparison–Outcome (PICO), PICO–Time (PICO-T) or PICO–Methodology (PICO-M) models,
- 3) Audits or evaluations of clinical service delivery processes, including comparisons with organisational policies, clinical practice guidelines or published practice standards,
- 4) Assessments of service data, such as referral or patient profiles, and
- 5) Results of literature reviews.

The ‘Call for abstracts’ may also have details on any themes or topics that will be highlighted at the conference. If in doubt about the suitability of your topic area, contact the conference organisers for advice.

Identifying the authors

At this stage, you should determine who will present the abstract or presentation, and in what order the authors

will appear in the conference proceedings. The *Recommendations for the Conduct, Reporting, Editing and Publication of Scholarly Work in Medical Journals* (4) provide guidelines on the roles and responsibilities of authors and contributors, which may assist in determining authorship. Some conferences require the presenting author to be the first author, or for the presenting author to be listed separately (5).

Starting the first draft

Good abstracts take time to write. It is challenging for even the best writers to capture the essence of their work in just 200–300 words. Many practitioner writers say the hardest part is getting started (6). Two strategies that can help are:

- 1) Starting with a list of questions that will be answered by your abstract
- 2) Starting with a list of headings from a structured abstract format.

Both strategies help to clarify what needs to be said, and in what order. In the early stages of drafting, there is no need to worry about the word count. The aim is to get ideas written down, preferably without editing at the same time. Katherine Firth's blog post on 'the perfect sentence vortex' gives suggestions for doing this (7).

Start with a list of questions

Liz Beddow (8) suggests that a good abstract will usually answer four central questions:

- 1) What is it about?
- 2) What did you do?
- 3) What did you find?
- 4) How is that important?

Jens Hansen's online article explains how to break down these questions further to help write the first draft, or drafts, of an abstract (8).

Another popular list of questions was developed by Robert Brown in his work on writing journal articles (9). Rowena Murray, an expert on academic writing, has modified the questions to focus specifically on writing abstracts. She also suggests appropriate word counts for the first draft (6) (p. 211):

- 1) Who are the intended readers? List three to five by name.
- 2) What did you do? (50 words)
- 3) Why did you do it? (50 words)
- 4) What happened (when you did that)? (50 words)
- 5) What do the results mean in theory? (50 words)
- 6) What do the results mean in practice? (50 words)
- 7) What is the key benefit for the readers? (25 words)
- 8) What remains unsolved? (No word limit)

To get started, Murray suggests spending 30 minutes working through the questions. If you get stuck on a question, Murray suggests leaving it and moving on to the next one. It's not a problem at this stage if the total word counts for each question are higher than suggested, or if the overall count is longer than the conference abstract guidelines allow. The aim here is to generate ideas and write them down so that, after 30 minutes, there is a section of text that can be edited into the final abstract.

Start with a list of headings

A second strategy to get started with drafting is to use a list of headings as a template. Many health and medical journals, and also Medline, use 'structured abstracts' to provide a consistent format for information. The list below comes from a range of different resources on structured abstracts available online (10–13):

Aims/Objectives/Purpose: Why did you do the research? What are the aims of the research? This may include a brief summary of the background or context for the study, and include the study's hypothesis or research question.

Methodology/Design: Describe the main method(s), research design(s) or approach(es) used for the research.

Results/Findings: What was found during the research? Provide a concise analysis or overview of the results of the research.

Discussion/Conclusion/Summary: What are the key outcomes or 'take home messages' from your research?

Implications: What are the implications for clinical practice for rehabilitation and assistive technology, AT practitioners, or health care delivery generally? How could it inform policy?

Again, the initial aim when drafting is to generate text for each heading. If the conference does not require the structured abstract headings, these can be removed as drafting continues. It may be necessary to add linking words and sentences between each heading to produce the final abstract.

Next steps

Once the abstract is drafted, through either a series of questions or structured headings, it will be necessary to edit and format the abstract. During editing, the aim is to reduce the word count down to the word limit, which is usually around 200–250 words. Acronyms, abbreviations and references are usually not used in abstracts. Also, consider getting someone else – perhaps a colleague or supervisor – to review the abstract and give feedback.

The final step is to format the abstract correctly for submission. Many conferences have specific formatting requirements in terms of font sizes and page setup, and some may produce templates suitable for word processors. Templates ensure that abstracts are submitted in a

consistent format. This makes it easier for the scientific panel to review and approve abstracts, and to publish the conference proceedings.

A final checklist

The checklist below (adapted from (5)) can be used to ensure the abstract is ready for submission to the conference.

Due date for abstract
 Address or website for submission
 Presenting author is listed as first author (if required)
 Presenting author meets eligibility requirements for the conference
 All authors are listed and names spelt correctly
 Author affiliations are listed and correct
 Abstract is structured according to the conference requirements (e.g., paragraph or structured abstract with headings)
 Abstract is within the word limit
 Abstract is correctly formatted (e.g., font size and style)
 Abstract has been checked by others for content, style, spelling and grammar
 Date abstract submitted:

Conclusions

Conference presentations are a great way for R&AT practitioners to share research findings more widely. Two strategies for planning and writing abstracts – answering a list of questions, and writing to structured headings – can help you get started with drafting. After editing, formatting and checking, the abstract should be ready to submit. Good luck!

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