

Professional development



Lorraine Byrnes



Beth Kelsey

Writing abstracts for conferences: How to *WOW* the reviewers

By Lorraine Byrnes, PhD, FNP-BC, PMHNP-BC, CNM, FAANP and Beth Kelsey, EdD, APRN, WHNP-BC, FAANP

In the September 2017 issue of *Women's Healthcare*, we published an article in the Professional development department about **creating award-winning posters for conference presentations^A**. In this issue, we discuss writing abstracts for conferences.



Six to 12 months before their annual conference dates, many organizations publish a call for abstract submissions on their websites. These calls for abstracts are generally divided into poster and podium presentations. If you wish to submit an abstract, which is blind-reviewed by members of a committee of your peers, you need to develop it so that it meets the conference's theme or purpose. For example, the annual conference of the National Association of Nurse Practitioners in Women's Health (NPWH) focuses on primary and specialty care topics related to women. If you want to submit an abstract to NPWH, you would choose a topic pertinent to women's health. In addition, you would need to pay careful attention to the written requirements of the call for abstracts. In this article, we address the steps you'll need to take in order to write and submit a successful conference abstract.

A conference abstract is an informative summary of the content you plan to present to conference attendees. The purpose of the abstract is to provide adequate information for the committee reviewers to determine whether it would be of interest to the conference audience and to assess the quality of your work. Your challenge is to provide this information in a complete, yet concise, manner that will catch the attention of the reviewers in a favorable way.

Select the right organization and conference

Most nursing organizations host an annual conference; many organizations also host regional and local conferences. You may be able to submit the same abstract to more than one conference, but read the abstract guidelines to be sure. Take time to explore potential conferences for your abstract submission and submit to a conference that will be feasible and affordable for you to attend. Consider the cost of registration, travel, and lodging. If accepted, will you be available to attend the conference? Registration, travel, and lodging expenses may be covered by your employer, but you need to verify this coverage prior to submitting your abstract.

Plan to submit your abstract to conferences that attract audiences that would be interested in your work. At the same time, choose conferences that interest *you* and that are held at a time and place that suit your schedule.

Consider conferences, both national and even international, that provide an opportunity for you to network with colleagues and disseminate information about a clinical practice, education, research, or policy study specific to your area of interest. Also, find out whether you need to be a member of an organization to which you

are submitting an abstract (many organizations have this requirement).

Read abstracts from the previous year's conference to see the topics that were presented. Many organizations holding conferences post these abstracts on their websites, in their journals, or in the [Virginia Henderson Global Nursing e-Repository^B](#) on the Sigma Theta Tau International website. Don't be discouraged if your topic has been presented in recent years; emphasize the unique contribution that your study or project makes to nursing and/or healthcare knowledge and practice!

Many conferences have broad themes or focus areas. Decide whether your presentation topic is a good fit for the theme; if so, be sure to include key words linking the theme to your abstract submission.

A word of caution: Predatory conferences have become a concern in recent years among researchers. A predatory conference is one that is not hosted by a nationally or internationally recognized organization. The goal of a predatory conference is to profit from researchers' need to publish and present by charging fees to do so. If you have concerns about a conference that you are interested in attending for the purpose of presenting, discuss these concerns with your mentor or seek guidance from an academic librarian. Unfortunately, Beall's List, the one e-resource for checking the predatory status of journals and conferences, has become unavailable.

Prepare to write your abstract

An important step—one that is often overlooked—is seeking mentorship in abstract writing. If you do not have a mentor, now is the time to reach out to potential mentors and ask for guidance. Persons who can serve as mentors include colleagues who have presented at conferences, faculty members with whom you have had a relationship, and nursing leaders with expertise in your subject area. Even if you do not have a relationship with a person who would be a suitable mentor for you, we encourage you to ask her or him to serve in this capacity for you. Don't forget: This person once looked to others to serve as mentors during her or his professional development. People who are able to play this important role in *your* professional development are likely quite busy, so allow adequate time for them to respond to your request.

Carefully read the abstract submission guidelines for the conference. Follow the guidelines' detailed instructions and formatting requirements *to the letter*. Comply with font, spacing, and margin rules. Allow adequate time for writing, review by a mentor or colleague, and

revision, if necessary; poorly written abstracts will be rejected. Of utmost importance: Adhere to the word limit! Abstracts that do not meet all the criteria set forth in the conference guidelines will not even be reviewed.

Write your abstract

Here are our step-by-step recommendations for writing the abstract itself:

Title

The title of the abstract should concisely and accurately reflect the topic of the submission. At the same time, it should catch the reviewers' attention and pique their interest. Choose the title wording carefully, because, once submitted, it cannot be changed. This title will be used in all conference materials.

The abstract submission guidelines may indicate the number of words permitted in the title. If you have some leeway, aim for a title length of 10 to 15 words. Reviewers and others who have written about abstract and manuscript titles offer these tips:

- Include key words. Review the [Medical Subject Headings \(MeSH\)^C](#) for acceptable keywords.
- At a minimum, include the *what* and *who* regarding your research study/quality improvement (QI) project:
 - Example of a research study title: Pregnant adolescents' satisfaction with group-based care: a qualitative study
 - Example of a QI project title: Increasing human papillomavirus vaccination rates in a family practice: a team-based approach
- Connect the title to the theme of the conference.
- Avoid the use of adjectives, which are usually unnecessary to convey the content.
- Don't try to be cute or funny; misinterpretation is always a possibility.
- Don't use abbreviations or acronyms, which may not be understood by all readers.

Components

The required abstract submission format may be either unstructured or structured. Less common is a requirement for an unstructured format, which may entail simply a summary of your work in paragraph form. More common is a requirement for a structured format that provides specific section headings for organizing the abstract. These headings may vary, depending on whether the abstract submission is for a research study, an evidence-based practice (EBP)/QI project, or other type of work. Be careful to choose the correct format for your ab-



With the proper **time**,
care, and **attention**,
you can **wow** the reviewers
and **earn** a place as a
presenter at the conference
of your choice.

abstract. One strategy to help organize an abstract with an unstructured format is to use headings and then delete them prior to submission.

In typical cases, you are asked to provide a brief introduction describing the background/significance of the research study or background/problem for an EBP/QI project and a statement of purpose for the study or project. Connect the purpose to previous or current research or EBP. This connection should be stated as a gap in knowledge or inadequate application of evidence in practice that affects quality of care and patient outcomes. Let the reviewers know why your study or project was relevant. If there is a research question or outcome objective, state it in one sentence.

After providing the background, describe the type of setting used and sample/population, including the sampling method. Then describe succinctly the methodology (e.g., design type, interventions/procedures, measurement tools, data collection, data analysis), results/findings, and implications for clinical practice, education, research, or policy.

Some conference committees accept abstracts on studies or projects in progress. Use the guidelines to determine whether your work has moved forward sufficiently to be accepted as "in progress." In most cases, the expectation is that data collection has started prior to the abstract submission date. If that is not the case, wait for the next year to submit the abstract or find a conference with a later abstract submission date.

Word limits

Writing an informative summary with all the required components within the word limit imposed on abstract submissions (typically, 350-500 words) is challenging! You'll need to be succinct and precise and, at the same

time, make a favorable impression on the reviewers. Make full use of the word count allowed. If you find that your word count exceeds the limit, follow these tips for streamlining your content while still providing essential information.

- Use accepted statistical symbols and abbreviations when expressing sample numbers, means, standard deviations, and greater than/less than instead of writing out these words.
- Use simple rather than complex sentences.
- Avoid unnecessary adjectives/adverbs/ancillary words throughout the abstract.
- Continuously ask yourself, "If I remove this word, will the meaning of the sentence remain the same?"
- Start with a longer abstract and then pare it down. This task may be difficult; your mentor or colleague should be able to provide guidance here.
- Maintain focus on your study or project. Do not stray into other areas.
- Avoid repetition.

Clarity and consistency

The information in each sentence should be clear and concise in conveying your meaning. Make each word count; omit words that are irrelevant. The abstract text should be well organized and flow smoothly from one component to the next. There should be evident consistency among the purpose, methodology, results, and implications.

Grammar, spelling, and style

Pay strict attention to the elements of good writing. Use active rather than passive voice and be consistent in your verb tense. For example, if your study or project has been completed, use past tense throughout the abstract. Avoid abbreviations and acronyms unless they

are spelled out the first time they are used. Use proper resources to check your grammar and spelling. If your writing style is suboptimal, ask a skilled writer or editor for advice. If English is not your primary language, ask a mentor or colleague who speaks and reads English fluently to proofread your work. Even if you follow the abstract guidelines to the letter, if you ignore the basic rules of writing, your abstract may be rejected.

Significance, relevance, and innovation

Here the word *significance* refers to implications for practice and/or future research related to your findings/results. This significance should be well articulated and answer the “so what” question. The reviewers should be able to discern that the significance is relevant to the intended audience and purpose/theme of the conference. Reviewers are also seeking innovation—abstracts that convey something new—to have maximum impact on the conference audience. Emphasize the provocative issues and new ideas that arose from your study or the uniqueness of your project, and how the audience will be able to use the information you present to improve clinical practice and health outcomes for their patients.

Add learning objectives (if possible)

Abstract guidelines may request the provision of learning objectives for the audience. Words used in the objectives may be in addition to the maximum word count for the abstract itself. Use this opportunity to your advantage, but be sure to word the objectives as measurable behaviors (e.g., describe, discuss, explain, list) that learners can perform after reviewing your poster or attending your presentation. Maintain consistency between the learning objectives and the presentation content.

Bloom’s taxonomy^D provides an excellent framework for writing learning objectives.

Consider the conference reviewers’ perspective

Reviewers generally serve the conference organization on a voluntary basis and have expertise in the content area. Abstracts are made available to reviewers after all identifying information is removed (blind review). The reviewers’ charge is to read the submitted abstracts without bias and consider the overall rigor of the submission and fit for the conference. Reviewers may be assigned abstracts representing their particular area of expertise. They are given specific criteria upon which to judge abstract submissions.

Of primary importance to reviewers is the quality of the

study or project. The reviewers’ judgment and decision is based solely on the abstract. The reviewers do not have an opportunity to request clarification or further information. Therefore, incomplete or poorly written submissions tend to be rejected. The goal is to submit an abstract that reflects the effort invested in the study/project.

Go from how to WOW

In this article, we have shown you how to improve your chance for success in preparing and submitting your conference abstract. With the proper time, care, and attention, you can wow the reviewers and earn a place as a presenter at the conference of your choice. ●

Lorraine Byrnes is Associate Professor and Associate Dean, Undergraduate Nursing Programs, at Hunter Bellevue School of Nursing in New York, New York. Beth Kelsey is Assistant Professor at the School of Nursing, Ball State University, in Muncie, Indiana; editor-in-chief of *Women’s Healthcare: A Clinical Journal for NPs*; and NPWH Director of Publications.

Resources

- American Psychological Association. *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*. 6th ed. Washington, DC: Author; 2010.
- Fowler J. Writing for professional publication. Part 11: writing conference abstracts. *Br J Nurs*. 2011;20(7):451.
- Holland K, Watson R. *Writing for Publication in Nursing and Healthcare: Getting It Right*. Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell; 2012.
- Ickes MJ, Gambescia SF. Abstract art: how to write competitive conference and journal abstracts. *Health Promot Pract*. 2011;12(4):493-496.
- Pearce PF, Ferguson LA. How to write abstracts for manuscripts, presentations, and grants: maximizing information in a 30-s sound bite world. *J Am Assoc Nurse Pract*. 2017;29:452-460.
- U.S. National Library of Medicine. Medical Subject Headings 2017. meshb.nlm.nih.gov/search

Web resources

- A. npwomenshealthcare.com/professional-development-creating-award-winning-poster/
- B. nursinglibrary.org/vhl/
- C. meshb.nlm.nih.gov/search
- D. cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/blooms-taxonomy/