

Dos and Don'ts in Abstracts
 Ten Thoughts After Reading Hundreds of Abstracts
 by Mary M. Shirley

1. Don't try to play baseball in a football game
 If you're writing your abstract for institutional groups, such as the Ronald Coase Institute or the International Society for New Institutional Economics (ISNIE), then write about institutions. An institution-free abstract will not be accepted by these organizations, no matter how brilliant.
2. Do explain, define, clarify.
 Assume the reviewers know nothing. Explain your conceptual framework, methodology, and data. Define your terms and acronyms. Clarify the ideas you cite, don't just label them Plato's hypothesis or Dante's model or Snoopy's rule. Write for Paul Zak's Mother. (Paul Zak says he always writes so that his Mom will understand him.)
3. Do write in the language of your reviewers.
 This language is usually English. If your English is weak ask a friend with good English to help you. Reviewers will overlook English mistakes, but they have to be able to understand your abstract to rate it.
4. Do play by the rules.
 Don't exceed the page limit. If you do, your reviewers will wonder whether you will be able to present your paper in the time allotted. Using a number 4 font and 1 cm wide margins won't counteract this impression. Don't send your entire paper, it won't be read. But, be careful: don't be so brief that your reviewers can't figure out what you're planning to do.
5. Do motivate. Don't preach to the choir.
 One way to shorten your abstract is to leave out your -- no doubt inspirational -- critique of neoclassical economics for its dismal failure to understand the all-important -- dare I say earth shattering -- role of institutions. Institutional scholars already believe these things.
6. And while you're at it, do avoid adjectives.
 Your paper won't be accepted because you describe its argument as "crucial", "significant", "important", "novel", "meaningful" or, dare I say, "earth shattering", but because your reviewers can see that it is all those good things. If they can't, adjectives won't help.
7. Don't advocate, discover.
 Normative assertions have no place in a scientific proposal.
8. Don't put a sting in the scorpion's tail

Omit clever parting shots in the last sentence that undermine all your careful words in the rest of the proposal. That includes promises you probably can't fulfill. But at the same time, don't lose your courage at the finish line. Don't conclude with statements such as these: "this is a small sample (short time, flimsy dataset, weak correlation, etc. etc.) and I am probably entirely wrong." Put your caveats in the body of the abstract and move on. You don't want your last words to cast doubt on the entire proposal.

9. Don't pull down others to lift your own work.

The thinkers you attack may be your reviewers, or their mentors or their friends. Your reviewers will consider your point of view, but your burden of proof will be much higher when you attack someone whose thinking they already know and respect. Far safer to say, "I can see so far because I am standing on the shoulders of giants" (with thanks to Roger Noll who gives this advice to his students).

10. Do theory, but only if you do it well.

An empirical paper stands on four feet: even if the theory is weak or unoriginal, the data can be interesting, the methodology clever, and the story intriguing. A purely theoretical paper stands on only one foot: a theory that has to be novel, interesting and clearly relevant to important institutional issues -- a far more difficult balancing act.