

A Dozen Dos and Don'ts:
Thoughts after Reading Hundreds of Abstracts
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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, and 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, a leading scholar in the field of neuroeconomics, says he always writes so that his mother 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.

Not everyone is as excited about your topic as you are. Your opening lines should explain why we should care about your research. This is more than explaining why the topic you studied is important. You also need to say how your research informs us.

6. Do motivate, but – don't forget the beef.

Every abstract should explain what you did and how you did it. A surprising number of abstracts leave the hamburger out of the bun. Be sure you include not only your question and answer, but your theory, your methodology, and your data.

7. Do motivate, but -- 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 role of institutions. Institutional scholars already believe these things.

8. 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." It will be accepted because your reviewers can read for themselves that it is all those good things. If they can't, adjectives won't help.

9. Don't advocate, discover.

Normative assertions have no place in a scientific proposal.

10. 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.

11. 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 work they know and respect. Far safer to say, "I can see so far because I am standing on the shoulders of giants."

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

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