# Writing linguistics abstracts
**Maggie Tallerman**

An abstract is a one- (or occasionally two-) page summary of a paper intended for presentation at an academic conference. The abstract is sent to the programme committee responsible for choosing papers to be presented at the conference. The committee evaluates your abstract alongside other submissions, and decides entirely on the basis of the abstract whether or not your paper should be accepted. Sometimes the committee will evaluate papers from all (or any) subfields covered by the conference; alternatively, your abstract may be sent out to a specialist in that particular subfield. The likelihood is that a number of abstracts submitted to any given conference will be rejected: for instance, the rejection rate for the two most general linguistics conferences in the UK and the USA (respectively the *Linguistics Association of Great Britain* and the *Linguistic Society of America*) is around 50%. Obviously, the rejection rate at a postgraduate conference may be lower, but this does not mean that all abstracts will be accepted.

Abstracts are typically submitted anonymously, that is with a title but not the author's name or institution, although a version including the author's name may subsequently be printed in the book of abstracts for the meeting in question.

The abstract is your first chance to promote your work to the linguistic public. It should be a short summary of a paper you are (or will soon be) prepared to give in public. The abstract is intended to cover both the main point(s) and conclusion(s) of the paper, and the arguments used to reach these conclusions.

1. Before you begin writing, the most important task is to know what you are intending to talk about, should your paper be accepted. It may be the case that you already have a written version of the talk, in other words that the paper will cover some piece of research that you have already undertaken. In this case, your abstract can summarize the existing paper. More often, you will have started the research but do not yet have a written paper. Plan the topic carefully, delimiting it to something that can be talked about in the allotted time at the conference.

2. Be realistic in your choice of topic. You may have a burning desire to tell the world everything that is in your PhD, but if you only have 15 minutes to do this, it would be much better to select a small, relatively self-contained area for the talk. If in doubt, go for less rather than more.

3. The abstract should essentially cover the following points, normally in this order
- a statement of the problem or research question to be discussed
- a sample of the main data illustrating the phenomenon under discussion
- a statement of the empirical and/or theoretical inadequacies of earlier work on the topic
- a solution, or work towards a solution to the problem.

4. Begin planning by reading carefully over the specific format required by the conference to which you are submitting your abstract. For instance, you will need to know whether the requirement is for a one- or two-page abstract, and you will need to know how long you have to present the paper. Time allotted can vary greatly: for instance, you have 15

minutes at the LSA, 25 minutes at the LAGB, and maybe one hour at certain specialist conferences.

5. Begin the text by stating the problem or research question. Do not forget that though you may be thoroughly familiar with your topic, the panel reviewing the abstract is likely not to be, even at a specialist conference. You must therefore state the area of the paper in sufficiently general terms, as well as with sufficient clarity, to engage the reader right from the start. Do not jump straight into the minutiae of (say) the question of whether some functional head has weak or strong features, but introduce your topic first. Most poor abstracts fail to respect this, and instead launch right into some arcane area of (say) minimalist theory. However, you must also get to the *general point* of the paper quickly, certainly within the first few sentences.

6. The abstract must include data to illustrate the major points being made. It is usual for data to be presented as numbered examples, not included as part of the running text. This is generally true of syntactic data, and must always be the case if the data cited are not from English. Non-English examples must be given a word-for-word (or morpheme-for-morpheme) gloss and a translation, set out as in any reputable journal. Glosses must be aligned word-for-word. If the data under discussion are (say) individual sound segments, or perhaps single words or morphemes, it is more usual to present them as part of the running text. The idea is to make the data clear and interesting, so you will need to decide how best to present it. For an abstract, it is not essential to cite the source of your data (if it is not your own), but don't forget to give proper citations on the handout when presenting the paper.

7. Your paper is likely to be (at least in part) a response to earlier work, and you will need to state why and in what way your research improves on existing solutions, citing these explicitly by giving author(s) and year. Do not resort to rudeness: simply note that there are empirical problems (*Blogg 1997 cannot account for the position of indirect objects in Martian nominalized embeddings*) and/or theoretical problems (*Blogg's solution relies on a lowering transformation, a mechanism generally agreed to be undesirable*). Some conferences require full references to be provided on a second page; if there is no mention of what to do with references, you may list at most three at the foot of the page, but it is also common practice to omit full references in the abstract. Do not take up half a page of your precious space with references!

8. Part of the abstract must be devoted to your own solution to the problem in hand. Make sure you leave enough space for this, and ensure that you don't merely issue a promissory note: 'a solution to this problem will be presented'. The analysis and argumentation should be described in sufficient detail for it to be properly evaluated, but avoid cramming in such excessive detail that the abstract becomes confusing and unreadable.

9. Decide who you are talking to before you start writing. For instance, if you are submitting an abstract to a general conference such as the LAGB or LSA, the use of *undefined* technical vocabulary which is very specific to your subfield should be avoided completely. On the other hand, if you are submitting to a specialist conference, it would be very strange to define terms known to all researchers in that field. For instance, if I

were submitting an abstract to the Celtic Linguistics Conference, I would not expect to define the term "mutation" [a term used for sets of morphophonological alternations in initial consonants, a phenomenon common to all the Celtic languages]. However, if I were hoping to talk about the same research at the LAGB or the LSA, I would define "mutation" in much the same way as in the brackets above.

10. Ensure that the tone is appropriate. There are two particular pitfalls to avoid. The first is the apologetic tone, often represented by the use of hedges such as 'I will try to, I will attempt to'. Avoid these entirely. Also, don't admit that you haven't yet finished the experiment or found a workable solution. (If the research is at *such* an embryonic stage, it probably isn't ready to be presented in public.) The second pitfall is the over-confident tone, often represented by such statements as 'I will prove that...', 'My analysis solves all earlier problems by...'. Don't forget that we can never prove the correctness of our analyses, and don't make grandiose and unsupported claims. Rather, you should say that you will argue, on the basis of X, that Y is the case.

11. Since you have a page and/or word limit, don't waste words by sloppy writing, but make your prose crisp and purposeful. You can *always* save space by improving your writing. But do not attempt to save space by excessive use of acronyms and abbreviations for names of constructions, rules or languages. Ideally, there should be *no* abbreviations (other than completely standard ones such as VP). If you really must have some abbreviation – only the case if the phrase occurs more than about four times – ensure that this is clearly defined at first mention: 'the importance of the Extended Projection Principle (EPP) is that...'. There is rarely any excuse for more than two abbreviations, and they simply make the abstract less reader-friendly and harder to process.

12. Ensure that you comply absolutely with all the published conference requirements for word/page limits, font size and width of margins. If font size is not mentioned, you should not normally use a smaller font than 12pt. If margins are not mentioned, you should leave adequate margins on all four sides of the text. Single-spacing is perfectly acceptable (unless double-spacing is requested.)

13. The visual layout of your abstract is extremely important (especially if abstracts accepted will be published in the conference book of abstracts) and can influence the decision whether to accept or reject your paper. Make sure the abstract is pleasing to the reader's eye. Two general principles apply:

- Don't try to steal space by cramming words into every corner. Numbered examples should be set off from the running text by an additional line space above and below.
- Ensure you make proper use of *all* the available space. A thin abstract that has double-spacing and has half the page taken up with references does not look good, and is unlikely to be weighty enough to say anything worthwhile.

Do not use half a dozen different fonts, but stick to one font for plain text, find a consistent way of representing emphasis (if you must use emphasis) and use italics for non-English data if it is part of the running text. Avoid excessive use of capital letters, which are visually distracting; in glosses, for instance, SMALL CAPS are best for grammatical morphemes. Paragraphs should be *either* indented *or* double-spaced, but not *both.* Note that the first paragraph below the title is *not* indented.

14. Your title should reflect what the paper is about as closely as possible, but should not be too long. A snappy title is OK if it *really* works, but it may also be a good idea to have a more sober sub-title following a colon.

15. If you are a non-native speaker of the language in which the abstract is written, it is vital to ask a native speaker to check it over carefully before submission. Make sure that the person you ask will not tell you it's fine unless it really is.

16. Even if you are a native speaker, it is essential practice to ask at least one colleague to look at your abstract and check it for typos, grammatical errors, ambiguities and infelicities of expression. Nothing looks worse to the programme committee than a poorly presented abstract which is full of typographical errors and confusing syntax.

17. Whilst you are in Newcastle writing your MA or PhD, you are expected to show your abstract to your supervisor in advance of submission as a matter of course. Ensure that you a) warn the staff member that the abstract is on its way, so that they can find a slot in which to attend to it; and b) give them plenty of time to read it, rather than saying 'Here's my abstract and I have to get it in the post tomorrow'. You can also ask another member of academic staff to read the abstract as a favour, provided the above two conditions are complied with. A printed version of the abstract, or an attachment, will be far more useful than a pasted version in email, since then the reader can check on the layout and overall appearance as well as content. Don't simply expect the staff member to print out from an attachment unless they are willing to do so (they may be working from home and unable to do this). There is also the possibility of sending us your abstract by fax.

18. Finally, and most importantly, give yourself enough time when writing your abstract to allow the ostensibly-finished draft to be put aside for several days. When you return to it, read it over carefully and see if it all still makes sense. If it doesn't make sense to you, then it certainly won't to the committee! This process of allowing space between what is in your head and what appears on the printed page is vital to all good writing. When you have just finished the 'final' draft you are still far too close to it to evaluate it properly. After a few days have elapsed, you will certainly find things you want to change, and should also spot typos and infelicities of expression etc.

19. And *really* finally, ensure that it's posted in time! Don't go to all that work only to discover that your abstract missed the conference deadline.

Good luck!

*Some online pointers to abstract writing*:
http://home.oise.utoronto.ca/~slrf2002/review.htm