



Writing an Abstract

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The purpose of an abstract is to give a reader a brief summary of a report. Based on the abstract, the reader will often decide if he or she wants to read the whole report.

An abstract is written after the report is finished and usually contains five elements in the following order: background, purpose, methodology, results, and a conclusion or recommendation. Figure 1 (Weissberg and Buker, 1990, p. 186) explains the five elements.

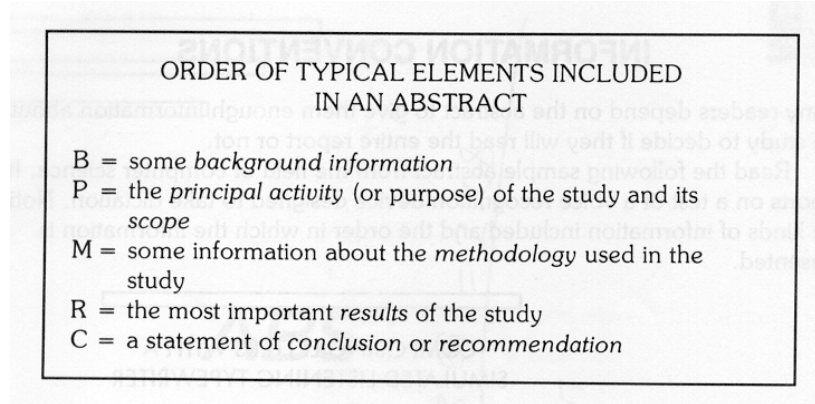


Figure 1. Abstract elements

The verb tenses in an abstract correspond to the tenses used in the report. Figure 2 (Weissberg and Buker, 1990, p. 192) shows examples of the elements and their verb tenses.

B	<i>Background information (present tense)</i> Example: In order to reduce costs, Thompson Consulting <i>needs</i> to find an alternative material for a top-secret military jet engine.
P	<i>Purpose (past tense/present perfect tense)</i> Example: Researchers <i>tested</i> aluminum alloy 6061, which is less expensive than the original zirconia alloy, to determine if it would be an acceptable replacement material. Example: Because of its lower cost, aluminum alloy 6061 <i>has been tested</i> to determine if it would be an acceptable replacement material.
M	<i>Methodology (past tense)</i> Example: Researchers <i>conducted</i> hardness and tensile strength tests on aluminum alloy 6061 samples that were heated and air-cooled, heated and water-cooled, and untreated.
R	<i>Results (past tense)</i> Example: The alloy <i>met</i> the requirements of minimum hardness (21,000 psi) and tensile strength (65 K) when subjected to temperature changes from 25°C to 625°C.
C	<i>Conclusions (present tense)</i> Example: These results <i>suggest</i> that aluminum alloy 6061 <i>can replace</i> the zirconia alloy in the jet engines.

Figure 2. Verb tenses for abstracts

References