

THE UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

Board of Graduate Studies

Abstract Preparation Guidance

The Abstract is an extremely important section of any thesis. It must achieve a lot in a small space, and must therefore be written extraordinarily well. It has to convey the essence of the thesis: the motivation, the course, and the outcome, and so needs to be properly structured, concise and informative - a good advertisement for what is contained in the thesis itself. It needs to be sufficient to allow prospective readers to decide whether the thesis is relevant to their interests, and therefore worth the trouble of obtaining and reading it.

The structure of the Abstract should follow that of the thesis itself, but expressed more in terms of logical conceptual sections than actual chapters (the headings are not necessary):

Motivations: This opening section needs to establish the context of the work, the situation or problem that is to be addressed, or set out the argument that needs to be resolved; that is, the rationale, theory or observations that prompt the major questions to be investigated, thereby conveying the importance and relevance of the study.

Methods: This indicates the kinds of information sought, the approaches taken, and the materials, equipment, subjects, methods, data analysis and so on, as appropriate, actually used. These should be set out succinctly, but sufficiently completely that the essential nature of the work can be understood. It is legitimate to omit minor or side issues, collateral enquiries and non-critical preparatory studies.

Results: The principal findings, discoveries or outcome should convey the achievements of the work in terms as concrete as possible: informative, accurate, factual. Avoid a detailed catalogue of minor results, statistical significances, minutiae and trivia; avoid lists, especially of values or other items.

Discussion: Generally this should be limited to an outline of the principal lines of reasoning, sufficient and necessary only for the conclusions reached and reported in the Abstract. It is understood that the thesis discussion itself may be very long, complicated and exploratory; there is no room in an abstract for more than a very brief statement of the most important arguments.

Significance: The results need to be related to the context of the motivation, and the ramifications, implications, recommendations or conclusions stated. Explain the outcomes and their significance to the various fields of application or contexts, the anticipated impacts or value of the results and their

interpretation. This is all as a means for the reader to assess the value of the outcome and thus of the value of taking the time and trouble to read the thesis.

An Abstract should not be a prospectus in the sense that a research proposal might be, nor should it be an elaborated 'Contents' listing, detailing chapter by chapter the areas but not the substance of the thesis. The reader wants to know what actually was done, what actually was found - not plans, hopes, aspirations or expectations. It should indeed be informative, not vague, merely optimistic or empty; do not chat, do not boast, do not overstate your case. There should be no literature references, although major authors or discoveries might be mentioned if absolutely essential to the motivation. The tenses used should follow the usual conventions: briefly, present for the current understanding, past for what has been done or achieved, future or conditional for implications. Generally, a passive voice is to be preferred to the active or personal. It should be carefully edited to remove empty words and phrases which dilute the real content, adding nothing to the substance. For example, do not start by saying "This thesis sets out to ...". The Abstract must stand alone as an intelligible piece of writing to an educated reader, but not necessarily a specialist in the particular field. Do not use abbreviations, symbols or jargon without explanation; avoid parochial references that will not be understood elsewhere; avoid opinion, hearsay, guesses, speculation - even if in the thesis. In fact, include nothing that is not in the thesis. Remember that the Abstract will be published by the University and affects the public perception of not just the value of the work but of the value of the University itself.

This may be your only opportunity to enthuse your reader: it is your primary advertisement for the results of long study, for the quality of your writing, and the value of your work. Lack of attention to detail in this (as in the rest of the thesis) will cast doubt on your ability to be painstaking and accurate, and thus undermine your credibility as a scholar. Remember also that it is the first thing that your examiners read; do not prompt misgivings at this stage by sloppy work. Aim to impress. It deserves your full attention, and the involvement of your supervisors. Take your time: ensure that it is in good English, with accurate spelling and grammar, technically correct, and easy to read.

The Abstract is commonly the most difficult part to write, trying to encapsulate several years' work into 200-500 words is hard. It is worth the effort.

March 31, 2004

September 1, 2010