

A few tips on writing abstracts

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Cautionary note These bits of advice reflect *my* opinions as a reviewer of abstracts. Other people might differ. (And, in turn, you will get some mixed reviews.)

- (1) **The opening paragraph makes or breaks it.**
 - a. Your reviewers have a lot of other abstracts to read.
 - b. Each abstract can have only one tone, and it is set by the opening.
 - c. You go a long way towards improving things by avoiding the auto-pilot temptation to open with “In this paper”.
- (2) **Two honest pages, and not more.** The two-page abstract, if done right, contains the right amount of information for a 20-30 minute talk. Thus:
 - a. Use the two pages, and use them well. No white space, no chart junk, no unused examples, etc. Pack the title and any other general information into the header.
 - b. Don't shrink your typeface, margins, inter-line spacing, or anything else in order to pack it all in. (As a reviewer, I absolutely loathe these tricks.)
 - c. Trim extra words. (Make a game of getting the final sentences of your paragraphs to fill most of their lines.)
 - d. Leave space for references. (They can be in abbreviated format, and even in a smaller font. Just don't deny your readers this information.)
- (3) **Beware of promissory notes.** A few can be effective, but there is always the risk that the reviewer will cry out, “So much is promised, so little is delivered.” One often senses that the research has not actually been carried out.
- (4) **Inline examples if possible.** No one wants to flip back and forth. Also, it diminishes the force of your argument, it causes some examples to get skipped over. (The ‘page of abstract, page of data’ is a weird remnant from an earlier time. That, plus lots of copying and pasting of submission requirements. Sigh.)
- (5) **End with a bang.** The final paragraph is probably the last thing your reviewer will read before assigning scores.
 - a. Don't end by listing problems. (That can happen earlier.)
 - b. Don't end with promises you haven't met in the abstract.
 - c. Do end with surprising new results or directions.
 - d. Do end with connections to the themes of the conference or its special sessions, if any.