Ten top tips: writing a conference abstract

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Submitting your work to a conference can seem a little daunting if you have never done it before but it is a great way of sharing your work with the wider world. If you have not been invited to speak at the conference, you can submit your work for inclusion and this can give you the opportunity to share in different ways. Usually, this will be as a free paper presentation or as a poster. Both are an excellent way of sharing work that you have undertaken, be it participation in research, an interesting case study, an audit, an educational initiative or even a quality improvement project and you will usually be asked to indicate which category you would prefer when you submit your abstract.

If you are really not confident to stand up and present your work, a poster may be a good choice; however, even for those who lack confidence, a free paper is quite a safe way to move into presenting as you usually have a very supportive chairperson who will help you and you only have to speak for a very short period — usually anywhere between 8 and 12 minutes. Before submitting your abstract, you need to think positive and be clear about what happens if you are accepted, how will you get to the conference, who will pay for it and will you be granted leave from your ogranisation to attend.

The most difficult part is getting your work accepted and this involves submitting an abstract. Abstracts can be challenging to write as you have very few words to sell your work, so it is important to get it right. These top 10 tips provide a brief overview of how to successfully write a conference abstract.

1 Ensure you know the deadline: lots of conferences have electronic submission of abstracts, and these close down completely once the deadline has passed. Therefore, if you get the date/time wrong, you will lose your opportunity. If you are submitting to a conference that is not being held in your country, remember to allow for any time differences. Don't be tempted to leave it until the last minute; lots of people do and this sometimes means the computer system crashes and you find that your opportunity to submit has gone.

2 Read the instructions: this seems an obvious thing to say but different conferences have different requirements. You need to take particular note of:
- What is the maximum word count?
- Can you submit additional documents?
- Do tables and figures count towards the word count?
- Can you use product names or not? Some conferences will automatically reject any abstract that names a product
- Do you have to already have data or will the required data be available by the time of the conference?
- What format are you required to submit in?
- Is there a specific font type and size?
- How do you present the title? This may have to be all in capitals, it may have its own word limit and might not contribute to the overall word count
- What author details are required (job title and institution, for example)?
- Do you have to have permission from your organisation to submit?
- Are there specific marking criteria?
- What are the rules about registering for the event and attending, especially if your submission is by more than one author
- Are there specific copyright requirements?
- What formats are available? Poster, free paper, poster with a short presentation?
- Are there specific categories you can enter into?
- Do you need to include references and, if so, are they part of the word count or a separate document? Also, what format do they need to be in (Harvard or Vancouver)?
- What is the conference's main language?

3 Find out what the theme of the conference is: if you can make your abstract fit with the theme, you are more likely to be accepted. If your work does not seem to fit at all, this does not mean don't try; you may have to write a little extra to explain how it would be of interest to the audience.

4 Think about who the conference is aimed at: Who is the typical delegate at the conference and what do you think would interest them — how will you capture their attention? What will make your work stand out above all of the others? Use the right language to appeal to them. If it is

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primarily clinicians, don't be too technical but if it is scientists, be sure to be technical (although conferences do sometimes welcome clinical papers that apply). Also, consider words and phrases that may be country specific — if the conference is international, you need to avoid the use of local phrasing, colloquialisms and especially abbreviations. The language used shows that you paid attention and thought about your audience. If you really aren't sure, do contact the conference organisers and they will guide you or put you in touch with a member of the programme committee. If you have attended the conference previously, which posters/free papers attracted you and why?

5 **Highlight the most important things:** before you begin, carry out an outline of what you want to cover and highlight the things that are most important. This way, if you go over the word count you don't delete the most important things.

6 **Do a draft in a Word document:** this allows you to do lots of things before tackling the submission process:
- You can spell and grammar check your work
- You can check and manipulate your word count. Most electronic submission portals are fanatical about word counts, so if the word count is 250 and you have written 251, they wont let you submit
- You can show your draft to others for comment
- You can obtain permission from your organisation/employer
- You can consider alternative ways of presenting your work — use tables, bullet points and/or add a figure as a PDF or Jpeg file — these all save words
- You can compare it to the instructions to make sure you have followed them
- You can compare it to your draft to see if you have included all of the items you felt were important
- You can discuss with co-contributors who

will be the lead author and presenter
- You can check your use of abbreviations and language.

7 **Always Save your work:** once you are happy with your Word document, ensure you save it to your computer marked as 'final version' and, personally, I always like to print a copy out.

8 **Check the submission criteria:** would you be eligible to enter your work for an award or special category, for example, first-time presenter, novice researcher?

9 **Submit your document!** ensure you double check everything before you press send; cutting and pasting frequently results in errors. I find one of the best ways to do this is to read things out loud, but if you are in a busy office this may not be possible! It helps to set aside time to do this as it frequently takes longer than you think — you may wish to put a 'do not disturb' sign up. Remember, you will have to submit lots of additional information so allocate plenty of time for this. As a minimum, you will need to include your contact details and those of anyone else involved in the work, including their email address, their organisation and sometimes a contact number.

10 **When you are successful, be sure to let people know:** put it on your CV, tell your boss, tell your family — they will all be really proud of you! Remember, this is now happening so you have to now prepare your presentation or poster. Most of all, celebrate.

Conclusion
While submitting an abstract to a conference can seem quite daunting, if you follow the rules set out in this article, it should be straightforward. It is a great way of sharing with others what you have done and a good way of easing yourself into doing a more formal presentation. Good luck!   **WInt**