

If you are abstracting your own writing

When abstracting your own work, it may be difficult to condense a piece of writing that you have agonized over for weeks (or months, or even years) into a 250-word [or shorter] statement. There are some tricks that you could use to make it easier, however.

Reverse outlining:

This technique is commonly used when you are having trouble organizing your own writing. The process involves writing down the main idea of each paragraph on a separate piece of paper. For the purposes of writing an abstract, try grouping the main ideas of each section of the paper into a single sentence. . . . Each one of these sections will be longer than one paragraph, but each is grouped around a central idea. Use reverse outlining to discover the central idea in each section and then distill these ideas into one statement.

Cut and paste:

To create a **first draft** of an abstract of your own work, you can read through the entire paper and cut and paste sentences that capture key passages. . . . A well-written humanities draft will have **a clear and direct thesis statement** and **informative topic sentences** for paragraphs or sections. Isolate these sentences in a separate document and work on **revising them into a unified paragraph**.

unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/college_writing

SAMPLES:

The following is an **149-word** abstract for a **90-page** master's thesis:

Between 1787 and 1951, several attempts were made to constitutionally limit the amount of terms that a president could serve. President George

Washington set the patriotic tradition of serving two terms of four years. In the Confederate Constitution, the southern states had changed the term limit to be one term of six years, with no eligibility to be reelected. In 1880, President Ulysses Grant challenged the two term tradition by allowing the Republican Party to put his name on the ballot; however, he did not receive the Presidential nomination. President Theodore Roosevelt ran in 1912 for a third term with the Progressive Party and came in second in the presidential race. In 1941, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt broke through the tradition and was elected for a third and fourth term to presidency. This event caused the Twenty-Second Amendment being drafted in 1947, and ratified by the states in 1951.

[Note that this abstract stands on its own; it does not mention “this paper”—it merely presents the paper’s argument and evidence in the same neutral tone as the paper.]

The following is a **151-word** abstract for a **300-page** doctoral dissertation:

This dissertation argues that ideas about black and white extermination in a war between the races influenced the development of slavery and precluded the acceptance of black freedom in America. Beyond the instrumentality of violence that we know was part of the master slave relationship, this study examines what impels white ideas in the eighteenth and nineteenth century that emancipation would ultimately lead to a race war. It attempts to demonstrate how ideas of extermination became part of the brutal legacy of racial control that sustained the institution of slavery and violence in the post-Civil War South. "A Curse Upon the Nation" traces the progression of these beliefs from the colonial period to the post Reconstruction era and how they traveled from Europe, Africa, and then to America, revealing that ideas about extermination became inextricably tied to race and freedom, making survival an important form of resistance for blacks in America.

[This abstract is a version of the first although it begins (unnecessarily) with “this dissertation” and uses (unnecessarily) “we.” “This dissertation argues that” could be deleted with no harm to clarity. On the positive side, the abstract is focuses and uses the correct tense.]

The following is a **95-word** abstract for an **18-page** article:

“Redemptive California?” asks about the role that California and the wider West played in post-Civil War America. Given that questions over the territorial expansion of slavery in the West hastened the coming of the Civil War, how did the wounded nation—and legions of wounded soldiers—look to the West after the war for convalescence, healing, even redemption? This essay suggests that historians have unaccountably ignored the impact of the Civil War on the West, c. 1865-1910, and it poses one organizing theme—western convalescence—by which to begin to correct this scholarly blind spot.

[This abstract needs elaboration of major supporting arguments/evidence. And it could easily be rewritten to delete references to “this essay”—versus to its topic, argument, and evidence. Still, it is useful as it provides its topic and major argument, i.e., not just its topic.]