

In the Realm of the Possible

Writing Abstracts to Refine Research

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Abstract

This article looks at the practice of having first-year writing students write abstracts to prepare for drafting a research essay. Abstract writing grounds students at a moment when they may be struggling to identify a clear context for their object of analysis. The assignment asks them to read and critique sample abstracts, sourced from journals and their peers, and then write one of their own using the research assembled from an annotated bibliography. Through sharing the abstracts, students notice opportunities for expanding claims, applying evidence, and clarifying argument in their essays. In this way, the assignment enables students to develop more confidence in their ideas; it also sharpens their genre awareness, as they recognize how abstracts service both readers and writers during the research process.

For a long time, students in NYU's Expository Writing Program wrote three essays in their first-year writing course, with the third referred to as "Reviewing in Context." When I joined the program in 2015, it was common to have students focus on a single body of work for this sequence, such as an essay collection by a particular writer. Their objective would be to consider that writer's work within a broader set of sociocultural concerns, including personal experiences.

In my class, students still complete three essays, moving from the expository and argumentative modes to a more research-driven combination of the two. However, their topics for the third essay tend to vary more widely, ranging from pieces of music and works of art to public spaces and social media posts. I refer to this sequence as the "Focused Research Essay," since determining a context for the essay's main inquiry is as important as developing an argument from that inquiry. Some students choose to recontextualize an object from one of the previous two essays (for instance, a student working on the sculptures of Tuan Andrew Nguyen in her first essay broadened her third essay to a discussion of the Vietnam War and PTSD). Others select a new object related to their interests.

In both cases, students grapple with more independently sourced texts than at any prior moment in the semester. Even if they have a good idea of how their essay is taking shape—and they typically do, having just submitted an Annotated Bibliography—they often experience a forest-for-the-trees moment, wondering what type of essay their research might yield. It's at this point in the semester that I ask them to write, share, and discuss abstracts of their essays-in-progress as a method of refining the research process. Students inevitably encounter abstracts as they search for scholarly texts. Becoming more familiar with the form, through discussing examples and writing their own, enables them to fulfill the twofold aim of generating new ideas, and framing those ideas for an interested reader. To analyze a cultural object and connect it with an experience, whether one's own or that of another thinker, is an abstract process. Writing makes that process an equally embodied one, reflecting an understanding of abstraction as "generative rather than imposed" (Bleeker, 2019). In this way, the formal constraint becomes something to dissect, adapt, and transcend.

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Preparation

Initially, asking my students to write abstracts felt like compelling them to appropriate scholarly discourse, or invent the university in its own language (Bartholomae, 1986). Would they ever need to write an abstract again? Was this practice really useful for developing more wide-ranging and expressive ideas? I hesitated to formalize the assignment, and yet I'd been moving towards it in other ways, such as asking students to write and evaluate their own essay prompts. A prompt may be understood as a coercive device for students to disguise as their own line of inquiry (Bawarshi, 2003). Abstracts represent a different type of effort: since it's impossible to disguise what hasn't been fully articulated, writing them becomes a means of containing what is there at any given moment, and anticipating what may yet unfold. In this way, abstract writing serves as a metacognitive exercise in genre awareness (Driscoll et al., 2020). Since the ultimate aim of writing an abstract is not mastering the form, but addressing ideas to a range of possible audiences, the early stages of a research essay give students the opportunity to "fail better" (French, 2016) on the path to clarity and cohesion.

I typically assign the abstract as one of three formal exercises leading up to the final essay, with the third of these tending to be the draft itself, or an organizational pre-drafting activity. To date, I have assigned the abstract as the third exercise only twice, usually going back and forth between assigning it as the first and second exercise. My original reasoning was that having students write abstracts *before* the bulk of their drafts would facilitate a smoother transition from the Annotated Bibliography—a standalone assignment—but more recently, I've discovered that they prefer having more time to complete multiple drafts (we do at least two as a group). Writing the abstract is as generative as it is structural, so the timing of the exercise, and the preparatory work leading up to it, is fairly flexible. The in-class preparation unfolds over two class sessions, or one week, at any point during the first three weeks of a six-week sequence devoted to writing and workshopping the final essay.

During the first of these two class sessions, we discuss model abstracts students have read for homework: two from *PMLA* and two written by students who have previously taken my course (the student models I reference in my assignment were written before the full essay draft was due). If there is time, I may also have us look at the beginning of a prior course reading that lays out its claims in the way an abstract would; this enables me to show how differently abstracts have historically functioned across different academic disciplines, particularly the humanities. Phillip Troutman (2019) has shown that it can be tricky to find good models of abstracts for students to follow, since humanities abstracts tend to be less formulaic than those from the social sciences. In particular, Troutman notes that humanities abstracts "may be more exploratory or essayistic, in which case it may be difficult to abstract a discernable claim" (p. 24). This observation is interesting in light of EWP's programmatic commitment to the essay form, as well as my own attempts to get students to understand the abstracts they encounter as essayistic. Exploratory or expository essays might well forego making a claim in direct terms. Even argumentative essays might delay their claims, depending on their evidence. How does this help students who might be struggling to identify their central claim in a more developed research essay? Providing a range of models for them to work with is crucial.

Implementation

During our discussion of the model abstracts, I ask students to notice key terms, compile important verbs, and identify potentially unwieldy ideas that appear to have been condensed into concepts (for example—see my accompanying assignment—the student writing on "cyborg feminism" aligns this concept with the "relational aesthetic" of Frank O'Hara's poetry offered

in the first model). We look for three key components in each abstract, which may be present to varying degrees: 1) a clear sense of what object anchors the essay's analysis 2) a generative tension between concepts and 3) the writer's emerging claim. From the published abstracts, students are able to recognize that even when a claim appears to be articulated clearly, ideas must be developed through evidence in the essay as a whole. I try to offer student examples at various stages of development, so we can imagine the type of work that needs to occur during drafting. Students respond to the ballet example's accessible voice—the kind of “stylistic flourish” Wayne Booth (2016, p. 198) recognizes as permissible within the formula of an abstract—even as they look for a specific relationship between the Degas paintings and the Scarry text. They appreciate the clearly defined context of the *Ex Machina* piece while noting that one would need to read the student's essay for a fuller understanding of the debate she raises.

These student examples correlate roughly with the two types of abstracts mentioned in a *Physics Today* article from 1949: indicative and informative. An indicative abstract helps researchers decide whether to read the entire article; an informative abstract provides a thorough summary of methods, data, arguments and outcomes, so that reading the entire article is unnecessary (Gray, 1949). Some humanities abstracts may be more indicative in that the full claim is not as legible in condensed form, and others may be more informative in that the argument is positioned in clear and direct terms. I do not use these precise terms during class discussion, but I do emphasize the characteristics of each abstract type to help students balance their intentions as writers with their queries as readers and researchers. In terms of the research process, students understand that although reading an abstract can expedite the time they spend with a potential text, abstracts do not indicate all sections of a text that might be useful to them. Further, they recognize that citing an abstract in place of a full article is unacceptable (MLA, 2019). As they begin the first of at least two drafts, they learn to identify why they think someone should read their essay—and more importantly, why they should write it. Notice how the student writing on *Ex Machina* begins to inform the reader what her essay will argue, while the ballet student promises a “deeper look,” holding herself to the task of providing evidence. These reader-directed gestures are inseparable from the writing challenges unique to each student's research agenda.

Once we've established the parameters of the abstract and where we might find opportunities to experiment within them, the entire class attempts a three-sentence “micro-abstract” as preparation for their own abstract, which is due the following session (the directions ask for 150-300 words, so “micro” would be 100 words or less). Each sentence corresponds roughly to the object-tension-claim model we identify in the preceding discussion. Since the students have just completed an Annotated Bibliography, my goal is to practice having them move from a bibliographic structure back into the essay form. To that end, I supply them with a pair of short pieces responding to a Damien Hirst installation. Any cultural object will do, providing that the pieces approximate the range of materials students might locate during the first phase of their research. (For ease of readability, I use a reference article and an expository essay). I give the students time to skim these articles and then, as a group or in pairs, examine how differently each author establishes a sense of fascination with the topic. Then, I have them do a Who-What-Where-When-Why-How analysis of a third piece, moving from the initial three question words they should all be able to identify with their research object—in this case, Hirst's installation—into a conversation about context: why *this* specific response exists *now* (review essays work particularly well for this exercise, recalling the “Reviewing in Context” origins of the third essay). I supply them with a pre-written “Who-What-Where” micro-abstract on the board with blank spaces for concepts related to *why* the work was made, and together, the students complete the abstract based on the readings they have just skimmed. Here is what one

class came up with (the italics represent my pre-written abstract; the bold concepts are sourced from group discussion):

*This essay explores Doreen Lynette Garner's recent installation "When You are Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea" as a response to Damien Hirst's "The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living." Hirst's original installation prompts viewers to consider **mortality**; Garner's sculpture prompts them to consider **the violent history of colonialism and specifically, chattel slavery**. Garner's work, in this way, contributes to a conversation about **racialized violence and suffering in the images we consume**, provocatively recontextualizing Hirst's take on the **vanitas tradition**.*

Completing this micro-abstract template in class may require some additional prompting as the students navigate between model abstracts, new readings, and a collaboratively written exercise, but it offers a way for them to explode their bibliography—to reassess what they've assembled, and to decide which texts should be identified directly in the abstract itself (Henderson, 2024).

On the second day, students come to class having written an abstract of their essays-in-progress. I have them share the abstracts in a group document, and then I assign two readers to each one. The first reader is asked to comment on the expectations their classmate's abstract creates for the full essay. Will it contain personal experience? What specific thinkers will it engage in scholarly conversation? How will the writer's cultural object provide us with an entry point into that conversation? The second reader is tasked with suggesting a title for the essay. Through this work, students apply the components discussed in the previous session, verifying the abstract's object, conceptual tension, and emerging claim. When everyone has received feedback, the students revisit their Annotated Bibliographies and rank each text in order of necessity and importance. At the end of the session, I ask them to free write about two texts that have taken on a surprising new relationship in response to this reordering. The free write offers a break from the compressing moves we've practiced in class and prepares students for further drafting.

Reflection

In the most successful realizations of this activity, students see fresh connections to their earlier work in the course, as well as their pre-college writing. Not only do some of them develop a new appreciation for a text or artwork, they see, through the concise syntax and deliberate phrasing abstracts demand, how a well-articulated problem engages readers: a key objective for each of the three essays they write. In effect, they recognize that their audience is determined by who chooses to continue reading with that problem in mind (rather than simply, say, a good hook that grabs the reader's attention—a piece of advice many students arrive at college with, but may not understand how to adapt). Writing an abstract for a reader who hasn't yet seen the entire essay is, of course, part of the protocol of submitting conference proposals. It is also a step in preparing a final essay for publication; at this stage, it is possible that someone else may compose the abstract. This distinction between author-generated abstracts and externally written ones is notable in the history of the genre (Fyfe, 2021), and it is certain to take new forms with Artificial Intelligence. Asking first-year students to attune to this difference can help them focus on what their draft says as much as how it sounds. They may even discover that earlier attempts to sound more academic do not actually suit their intentions.

Another benefit of writing abstracts is that students prioritize more complicated texts, readings they might have skimmed (say, on the basis of reading an abstract) during research. Revisiting and ranking their bibliographies lets students see which texts are doing the heavy

lifting, and encourages them to revisit complex concepts in their original context. When the exercise goes well, their ideas crystallize around these concepts. Other results, however, tend to follow one of two opposing extremes. Some students rely excessively on one book or article from their research in the abstract: co-opting a scholar's work, in effect, rather than responding to it. Other students have difficulty extrapolating more than the sum of their existing research: they generate list-like abstracts, losing the tension between concepts we identify during discussion as essential to a developed idea. (See the student who began with a great idea about creating art in wartime, but assembled too many texts about too many wars, instead of unpacking an artwork produced in response to a specific conflict.)

Continuing to revisit the abstract during class activities and conferences would be one potential response to these issues. Given that I typically assign the abstract before the bulk of the essay has been written, it would make sense to have students write abstracts of each other's full drafts, in addition to providing initial comments on Day 2 of the in-class portion of the exercise. Students could compare these peer-generated abstracts with the originals to test the effectiveness of their claims. Since students often want to rewrite the abstracts after their ideas shift, I could also make the rewrites a low-stakes revision activity. The different versions of each student's abstract would become a useful structuring tool for feedback during our one-on-one conferences. As for the assignment itself, I plan to update the model abstracts to include a greater variety of humanities disciplines and journals. Although I ultimately intend for students to benefit from writing abstracts wherever they are in their process, it is important that they understand the difference between a generative abstract that will refine their research and an undercooked assemblage of thoughts compiled from a bibliography. To that end, I will ask students to bookmark examples of abstracts they find during the initial phase of research so that we can discuss these examples together, hopefully enabling them to distinguish a generative abstract from one that is perfunctory (or even artificially generated).

The issues students encounter when crafting abstracts of their drafts-in-progress point to abstraction itself as a challenge inherent to the work of a first-year writing course. Fundamentally, abstracts lay bare the relationship between part and whole, the essential components of an essay in any genre. Defining that relationship can be especially frustrating for students navigating the scholarly essay with a breadth of personal experiences and a range of skills. But it also places them within Henri Bergson's realm of the possible: a space where the actualization of ideas coexists with their innate potential. Because of the double-facing nature of abstracts—not quite existing in the realm of “before” or “after” the formation of an idea—students recognize their ability to carry out this potential in their essays. According to Bergson's formulation, we situate ourselves in time through a continuous process of searching, which is recognizable to us “only through an artificial effort of abstraction” (Bergson, 1930/1965/2002, p. 272). This effort is comparable to an artist's conception of a picture before it is fully executed; the ultimate realization of the design inevitably transcends its original conception. Bergson frames abstraction as “stilted” and ultimately “inadequate” (p. 271). We are in a constant state of hesitation and elaboration, an inescapable push-pull between what is and what could be. Yet this makes the state of abstraction all the more necessary. When students consciously inhabit this state through the writing of abstracts, the artificiality Bergson describes brings about an intermediary form of clarity. We could contend that a good abstract might sound like a bad AI summary. But all abstracts, whether generated by authors, readers, or machines, must answer the same question: “Why would I want to read this essay?” Only a writer can answer that.

ASSIGNMENT

Abstract

Objective

To write a short abstract of Essay #3 that you will use to help determine a direction for your remaining research.

Instructions

Have a look at the sample abstracts for academic articles in this document. Then, write your own abstract. Include a tentative title for your essay. Your abstract—which needn't be longer than a short paragraph—should contain a basic sense of the problem you're exploring in your third essay, the major texts/works of art you'll use to launch your analysis, and the argument/ideas you'll be presenting. Ideally, working on this abstract will help you see which pieces you're missing, so you don't have to be completely certain about every part of your essay just yet.

Please include brief annotations for any texts you've added since submitting the Annotated Bibliography assignment.

Length: 150 to 300 words.

Sample Abstracts

Glavey, Brian. "Having a Coke with You Is Even More Fun Than Ideology Critique." *PMLA*, Volume 134, Number 5, October 2019, pp. 996–1011. <https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2019.134.5.996>

This essay addresses the recent reception of Frank O'Hara's poem "Having a Coke with You" to examine the much-maligned concept of relatability as a potentially useful aesthetic category. If the reactions to it on *Twitter* and *YouTube* are any indication, O'Hara's Coke poem has become his most famous piece, immensely popular both online and, in a strikingly different way, in the work of contemporary queer theorists. Whatever the context—queer utopian criticism, an anarchist journal, a wedding ceremony, or even an official Coca-Cola public-relations campaign—readers tend to respond to the poem's general mood rather than to its specific content. This reception speaks to the fact that O'Hara pursues what I would label a poetics of relatability: "Having a Coke with You," like many other O'Hara poems, models ways of valuing art by relating it to other things and people. O'Hara explores this relational aesthetic by constantly negotiating between modes of reception that are self-reflective and modes that are social and intersubjective.

Bronstein, Michaela. "Taking the Future into Account: Today's Novels for Tomorrow's Readers." *PMLA*, Volume 134, Number 1, January 2019, pp. 121–136. <https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2019.134.1.121>

The idea of writing for the future often seems like a selfish act: a claim for personal immortality. Yet writing with future readers in mind also requires imagining the needs of a world radically different from our own. This paper examines *Future Library*, an artwork in which authors contribute writing that will not be read until 2114, and the fiction of David Mitchell, one of the contributing authors. In these works, writing for the future is political, not because it represents the future but because it simultaneously demands intervention in the present and opens itself to the new and to unexpected future uses.

Sample Student Abstracts Written by Previous Students

Student #1: “What Happens in Ballet, Stays in Ballet”

There’s something about ballet that is enchanting to the eyes. The beautiful men and women who seemingly float in the air, wear dazzling costumes, and express their emotions through movement and music. But, there is so much more that happens than what is seen on stage. So what is occurring when the curtains are closed, and when the studio doors are shut? The essay “What Happens in Ballet, Stays in Ballet” gives a “behind the scenes” view of what happens within the ballet world. Straying away from the stereotypical view of ballet that includes women spinning on the tips of their toes and wearing pink tutus and tiaras, the essay gives a deeper look at the less beautiful, less glamorous, and most definitely, less spoken about but incredibly common experiences within ballet. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* by Elaine Scarry guides the essay’s argument to create a contrast of the idealized and glorified lives of ballet dancers as demonstrated in Edgar Degas’s paintings “The Ballet Class” and “The Dance Foyer at the Opera on the Rue le Peletier.”

Student #2 (Untitled)

This essay addresses the relationship between artificial intelligence, the female body, and subversion in *Ex Machina*. Using the film as a microcosm to explore gender and technology, I hope to examine the film’s potential as an attempt at modeling cyborg feminism. Donna Haraway’s *A Cyborg Manifesto* will serve as a critical foundation for examining to what extent Ava represents a subversive cyborg, and how empowering the idea of a modern cyborg really is, in the context of artificial intelligence and social media. With the rise of AI influencers like Lil Miquela, perhaps cyborg feminism has been appropriated by mass media; I hope to explore *Ex Machina* as a site of debate over the potentials and pitfalls of fusing gender and technology.

Supplementary Material

For supplementary material accompanying this paper, including a PDF facsimile of the assignment description formatted as the author(s) presented it to students, please visit <https://doi.org/10.31719/pjaw.v9i2.245>.

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