abstracts assignment sheet

the genre

Academic researchers rely on article abstracts—summaries published in academic databases—to help them keep up with scholarship in their own field and to survey scholarship in unfamiliar fields. In the natural sciences and the social sciences, abstracts consistently follow a fairly well defined model. By contrast, in the humanities, abstracts vary widely in their format and quality. Some are written by the article's author; others by librarians or by bibliographers at the database companies who publish them. Some very clearly detail the argument, while some only hint at it or merely describe the topic. Moreover, humanities articles themselves sometimes have aims other than to argue for a single claim; they may be more exploratory or essayistic, in which case it may be difficult to abstract a discernable claim. Still, I want you to be looking for claims, as they are usually there, even if masked as fact-statements.

The language of abstracts remains neutral; abstracts do not evaluate the arguments or develop their own claims. However, for your abstracts, you may hint at strengths and limitations of the article through descriptive verbs (e.g., *asserts*, *claims*, *demonstrates*, *suggests*), as long as these terms describe accurately what the article is doing (and we would all agree with you). Write your abstract in the third person, referring to the author or authors by name and/or to the article as doing things (e.g., "the authors argue," "the article reveals," etc.). Quote only if absolutely necessary; paraphrase and summarize instead.

components*

Your abstract must be 250 words (min.) to 350 words (max.) and:

- restate the article's **central question** or topical problem.
- summarize the article's **central claim**(s), conclusions, discoveries, or results, including all **components** of multi-part claims.
- identify the article's **primary source base** in detail--e.g., genres, dates, authors, titles, of the historical images and documents they analyze.
- describe the research and/or analytical **methods**--e.g., theoretical approaches, key concepts, quantitative techniques, etc.
- indicate the article's **larger aims**, if any are stated.

Altogether, these tasks are closely related to what Joseph Harris calls *coming to terms*: understanding the aims, methods, and materials of another writer's work—except that you will not be using evaluative language.

evaluation

An excellent (*A* range) abstract accurately conveys all elements above in clear third-person prose with minimal quotation, logical organization, and close attention to the format. A strong (*B* range) abstract accurately conveys almost all of the elements above, with some key component of the claim or question missing or unclear, or some general lack of clarity or organization, or some serious moment of inattention to the format. A basic (*C* range) abstract accurately conveys the majority of the above, but with one or more major elements missing or inaccurate, or a general lack of clarity or organization, or a general inattention to the format. A poor (*D-F* range) abstract has major inaccuracies, profound lack of clarity or organization, or serious disregard for the format. In the *A* to *C* ranges, I will assign +/- to reflect particular strengths or weaknesses.

format & citation

Write your abstract in the **third person**, referring to the author(s) by surname(s), as in my model. The citation style here is a mixed one, modeled on those of academic book reviews in history:

- Single space, printing to one sheet.
- Title of your abstract. Use keywords from the article. Make it witty if you like.
- Give the full citation in Chicago *footnote* style (first name first), just below your title. Note formatting: "article title," *journal title*.
- Byline just below the citation: "Abstracted by *Your Name Here*."
- If you quote or paraphrase closely, cite page numbers in MLA style, e.g.: (171).
- Word count at bottom in square brackets, e.g.: [297 words].

models

- My model abstract: https://visualpast.wordpress.com/2014/01/14/the-irish-dave-chapelle-of-the-1910s-model-abstract/

- Student models (with permission) from past semesters of this course: https://visualpast.wordpress.com/tag/model-abstract/

- Student models (with permission) from my course on comics and graphic novels, CXStudies: http://cxstudies.blogspot.com/?view=mosaic

audience

Your peers in this class comprise your audience. All abstracts will be available to your peers on Blackboard. Peers might peruse them for further research ideas. You are also thinking about how you would need to come to terms with this article--potentially, at least--in your research paper; so in that sense, you are an audience for the abstract.

learning objectives

You will gain practice in the principles of

- Comprehension: reading for complex, multi-part claims as well as methods, source materials, and parameters of an academic research article
- Concision: conveying meaning in a tightly constrained format
- Precision: demonstrating comprehension of an articulated academic argument
- Synthesis: using summary, paraphrase, and highly selective quotation
- Clarity: using action-oriented subject-verb structure.

* For more detail on writing social science abstracts, see John M. Swales, and Christine B. Feak, *Abstracts and the Writing of Abstracts* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009).

Supplementary material:
- positive model abstract
- imperfect model abstracts
- plagiarism fun
- concision exercise
- intellectual action verbs

positive model abstract

"The Irish Dave Chappelle of the 1910s?"

Kerry Soper, "From Swarthy Ape to Sympathetic Everyman and Subversive Trickster: The Development of Irish Caricature in American Comic Strips between 1890 and 1920," *Journal of American Studies* 39.2 (August 2005): 257-296.

Abstracted by Phillip Troutman

Soper challenges the popular and scholarly conventional wisdom that early twentieth-century ethnic caricatures were nothing more than blatantly and demeaningly racist in intent and effect. Instead, drawing on recent studies in caricature, minstrelsy, and African-American popular culture, Soper argues that stereotypes carried meanings that were multilayered, multivalent, and unstable. He researches Irish stereotypes in newspaper and magazine comic strips between 1890 and 1920, revealing six distinctive but often overlapping categories: the "inferior, animalistic, racial type"; the "cultural scapegoat"; "the laughable ethnic fool"; "the clever or wise fool"; the "'useful other' in the romantic sense"; and "the heroic, subversive trickster" (258). He closely follows three case studies—Frederick Opper's *Happy Hooligan*, Richard Outcault's *Yellow Kid*, and George McManus's *Jiggs*—to chronicle a trend towards greater complexity and subversion. He explains this dramatic change by way of three historical developments. First, the format evolved from single-panel gag comics to long-running multi-panel series, where character development—and therefore reader identification—were increasingly important; to sustain interest over time, readers needed to sympathize with the characters, not just laugh at them. Second, the shift from local papers to national syndication created an increasingly diverse readership, including more Irish-Americas, and comics now had to play to a broader middle-ground audience. Third, Irish-American cartoonists themselves eventually found commercial success, sometimes using Irish stereotypes to critique the dominant white culture. In his conclusion, Soper briefly addresses the larger question of whether racist caricatures can ever be fully redeemed. He critiques the "cultural amnesia or naivety" characterizing the unthinking proliferation of racial stereotypes in popular culture; he calls instead for a self-conscious "revival of playfully ambivalent genres of ethnic comedy" (296). [271 words]

negative model abstracts

Below are abstracts for the same article above from two different databases. Note that these do NOT successfully address all the criteria for your assignment. (For positive models, search the blog for "model abstracts" and click that tag to show them all. The one I wrote is on Kerry Soper's article on Irish Stereotypes in Comic Strips. Students have contributed a number of excellent abstracts I have included as models for you.) How would you grade each one below, based on the criteria laid out in the assignment sheet? What is each one doing or not doing, compared with my model above (aside from word count)? Which one of these do you like better? Why?

The first abstract lifts language directly from the article itself. This often happens when the author writes the abstract, and it is even seen as acceptable when database companies do it. But if you were to lift language directly in this way in your project, you would be committing plagiarism. I want you to cast your abstract in the third person (e.g., "the article argues," "the author claims," etc.) and to paraphrase and summarize, quoting as little as possible.

Kerry Soper, "From Swarthy Ape to Sympathetic Everyman and Subversive Trickster: The Development of Irish Caricature in American Comic Strips between 1890 and 1920," *Journal of American Studies* 39.2 (August 2005): 257-296.

abstract in *Academic Search Complete* database *(don't follow this model)*

> The article focuses on the development of Irish caricature in American comic strips between 1890 and 1920. Observed from a distance, the prevalence of ethnic stereotyping in late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century cartooning in the United States is disturbing. There were some blatantly racist depictions of ethnic minorities in cartoons and comic strips during this period, but there was also a complex spectrum of ethnic characters who played out shifting comedic and social roles. This article explores the complex patterns of identification, sympathy, and denigration that can emerge in cartoon representations of ethnic identity.

abstract in *America: History and Life* database *(don't follow this model)*

> The evolution of ethnic caricature of Irish Americans in humor periodicals and newspapers during 1890-1920 reflects a softening of attitudes toward Irish immigrants as they achieved a degree of assimilation and as the public's immigration concerns began to focus on Eastern Europeans. Three popular cartoon characters, Frederick Burr Opper's Happy Hooligan, Richard Outcault's the Yellow Kid, and George McManus's Jiggs, partially retained the phenotypical stereotypes that expressed a virulent racist conception of the Irish as simian degenerates in popular comic drawings of the mid- to late 19th century, but they also invested the Irish with new, more agreeable ethnic stereotypes, portraying lovable ethnic fools and tricksters who struggled with assimilation and exposed the pretensions of the dominant society. In addition to Irish assimilation, the emergence of the Irishman as a sympathetic everyman, typified by Jiggs, also reflects changing newspaper readership, as publishers aimed to capture a larger middle-class audience, providing more genteel material. Abstract by P. Durkee.

plagiarism fun*

Re-read: Project 1 Assignment Sheet: Abstract (Wp top menu).

Read: McBride, "'Patchwriting' is More Common than Plagiarism, Just as Dishonest," Poytner.com. [Also in Bb>E-Reserves.]

Sketch: printed, Double Spaced. Plagiarism Fun!

Write a completely plagiarized **abstract of your chosen article** (from my Article List): Lift all the best phrases, sentences, and passages you can, cutting and pasting them into a new work document. Highlight them in the article as you find them. Don't use quotation marks. Don't cite page numbers. Don't worry about smashing them together or mixing in your own words to make full sentences. Total plagiarism.

Make it about 150-200 words. Title this document "**Totally plagiarized abstract**." Type up the full citation (copy if from my list if you like) and put this at the top of your plagiarized abstract. You can choose whether or not to put your name on it. Put "**plagiarism**" in the filename, too, so you won't mistake it later for your own prose. You stole this, remember.

Bring the sketch, **PRINTED**.

*This exercise takes inspiration from creative plagiarism contests, e.g., the one described in Lee Benson, "Plagiarism is the goal in hot writing contest," *Deseret News*, 19 Dec. 2005, https://www.deseretnews.com/article/635169845/Plagiarism-is-the-goal-in-hot-writing-contest.html.

Concision & clarity

Concision entails deleting unnecessary words and loading as much specific meaning into the words you keep. For you as the writer, it develops discernment, making your analysis more nuanced and precise. For your readers, it helps establish clarity. It can also be worth a lot of money: grant applications impose strict word limits, and your career can be jump-started or stalled by a one-page job letter. In article abstracts, concision is essential. Do this exercise to cut unnecessary words from your abstract.*

First, mark up your draft:

    1. Circle all prepositions: *at, about, considering, despite, except, for, from, in, like, near, of, onto, regarding, than, that, to, upon, versus, with*, etc.

    2. Box all *being* verbs: *is, are, were, will be*, etc.

    3. Underline the actor in each sentence (the person, idea, event, etc., doing the action), whether or not it is the grammatical subject of the sentence.

Now try to eleminate those circled/boxed words:

    4. Rephrase to eliminate the prepositions, if possible.

    5. Replace *being* verbs with action verbs.

    6. Make actors the subjects of sentences; convert verbs from passive to active voice. (This will help with clarity if not concision.)

Finally, troll for words with little added value:

    7. Delete imprecise terms and phrases, e.g.: *differences, changes, particular, certain, complex, based off of*. Rewrite those sentences to tell us *which* differences, *which* changes, *what kind of* complexities, *the exact nature of the* relationship (causal?), etc.

    8. Delete words that add little meaning: *truly, actually, effectively, basically*, *really*, etc.

    9. Delete reduancies or implicit terms, e.g.: ~~the fact~~ that; ~~terrible~~ tragedy; *hopes* ~~and dreams~~; ~~discipline of~~ history; ~~future~~ speculations; ~~true~~ facts; ~~free~~ gift.

    10. Convert long phrases into shorter ones, e.g.: *despite the fact that* → *although*.

intellectual action verbs

Using specific verbs to describe the intellectual work of scholars will help you identify exactly what they are doing (e.g., *mentioning* something is quite different from *focusing on* it). It can also imply your stance towards that writer's actions. E.g., if you say a scholar *demonstrates* something, you imply that you're convinced. If you say a scholar *asserts* something, however, it probably means they have not given you enough evidence or reason to be convinced. *Argue* and *claim* are usually neutral in academic contexts. The verbs below are grouped roughly by connotation—they are *not* synonyms. You must also use them correctly: one does not *explore into* a topic; one *explores* it. One does not *ask if* something is true; one *asks whether* it is.

exhibits	argues	questions	assumes
reveals	claims	inquires	asserts
conceals	reasons	explores	attests
obscures		investigates	proclaims
shows	articulates	tests	expresses
demonstrates	categorizes		denounces
illustrates	differentiates	focuses on	instructs
illuminates	analyzes	delves into	
elucidates	distinguishes	spotlights	believes
exposes	discriminates	highlights	discloses
clarifies	chronicles	features	is certain
explains	details		has faith
describes	maps	deliberates	thinks
	graphs	ponders	feels
discerns	composes	contemplates	doubts
ascertains	charts	meditates	is uneasy with
discovers	defines	mulls over	deems
finds out	stipulates	ruminates	judges
sees	theorizes	imagines	valorizes
understands	hypothesizes	reflects upon	values
knows	guesses	considers	privileges
perceives	speculates	denies	
comprehends	evaluates		[neutral/bland:]
points out	assesses	mentions	says
confirms		notes	writes
substantiates	suggests	notices	states
establishes	implies	introduces	talks about
concludes	infers	cites	conveys
disproves	hints	ignores	communicates
proves*	supposes		discusses

*Note: Scholars rarely use the term *prove* in a formal sense. In the sciences, one can *dis*prove a hypothesis, but never prove it. (Don't believe me? see http://theconversation.edu.au/forget---what---youve---read--science---cant---prove---a---thing---578). Math and philosophy involve *proofs*, but that's not the same as proving something. Lawyers might *prove*, but only beyond a reasonable doubt. *Establishing* or *demonstrating* are the closest we come to proving things, since we recognize that new evidence or new methods of analysis may always come to light.