

# Writing conference abstracts

Shigeto Kawahara

## 1 Questions that reviewers get

- (1) Typical questions conference reviewers get
  - a. Does the abstract offer a substantive and original proposal?
  - b. Are the details of the authors proposal adequately developed and explained?
  - c. Does the paper make substantial contributions to the field?
  - d. Is the paper relevant enough for our conference?
  - e. Comments to the author and comments to the organizers
- (2) In short, they want an original, complete, and interesting abstract.

## 2 Elements of conference abstracts

- (3) A structure of an abstract
  - a. Introduction
  - b. Data (or method, in experimental work)
  - c. Analysis (or result, in experimental work)
  - d. Discussion (comparison with alternative analyses, further consequences)
- (4) Introduction
  - a. Explain why your abstract is important to the field.
  - b. This portion is very important. You don't want reviewers to think "why bother going to this talk?"
  - c. Briefly explain what your proposal is.
  - d. Don't write a mystery novel. Tell what your idea is as soon as possible
- (5) Data
  - a. Introduce your data in a legible manner.
  - b. Tables and figures are good.
  - c. But do not put too much information—present only a subset of data you have if necessary.
- (6) Analysis
  - a. Always present your analysis first.

- b. Make sure you spend more time on illustrating your analysis than debunking alternatives.
  - c. If an attack to an alternative is longer than your analysis, it is a bad sign.
- (7) Discussion
- a. Comparison with alternatives.
  - b. Don't say, "This paper shows evidence against X's theory", always say, "This paper shows evidence for Y, and compares it with X".
  - c. Name and depersonalize the alternative theory. It is better to say, "A faithfulness-based analysis (Kawahara 2006) does not account for X" than to say "Kawahara (2006) is fundamentally mistaken when he says...".
  - d. Discuss further consequences, but don't be too general. Don't say "my proposal has far reaching consequences for general linguistic theories".
- (8) Conclusion
- a. End with a strong summary, rather than remaining questions.
  - b. Repeat why your work is important.
  - c. This paragraph is the last paragraph that the reviews read. It stays in their memory!
  - d. No new problems, no new results, no surprises.

### 3 Other stylistic tips

- (9) Citation: It is very important to cite the previous studies.
- a. Evidence that you know what you are talking about.
  - b. With appropriate citations, your abstract is likely to be sent to appropriate reviewers (whose work you cite).
  - c. Your reference list does not need to be complete (in which case you say "Selected references")
- (10) Typesetting
- a. Minimal 12 pt.
  - b. Lots of margins.
  - c. Some space around your figures, tables, diagrams, and examples.
  - d. Clear subheadings. Extra line between each paragraph.
  - e. You can put your title in the header.
  - f. Embed fonts.
- (11) Other tips
- a. Don't start your paper with "In this paper, I...". Be more creative. My first sentence is usually a description of the state of the field.
  - b. Don't be too general. It can be construed as "too vague and content-less".
  - c. Interleave your data in your text (no matter what the style guide says)—many reviewers read abstracts as PDF files.
  - d. I don't recommend using abbreviations in abstracts.

- e. Avoid future tense (“this paper will show”). It sounds like your idea has not been developed.
  - f. Avoid intensifying adjectives and adverbs (“this paper has a striking consequence”, “my analysis is an important contribution”, “my analysis is undeniably better than Xs analysis” etc)
- (12) Get help
- a. Start early and get comments from your advisors and friends.
  - b. Faculty members are the typical reviewers! They (should) know whats good and whats bad.
  - c. Your friends can tell you leap of logic and potential misunderstandings.
  - d. <http://web.clas.ufl.edu/users/wiltshir/abstract.htm>
  - e. <http://www.lsadc.org/info/meet-ann08-abguide.cfm>