

Basic Principles of Writing Thesis Abstracts Focusing on Topic Sentences

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With the advent and growing popularity of artificial intelligence (AI) programs such as ChatGPT and on-line translators such as Google Translate and DeepL, self-created academic writing in the English language by ESL students is facing a grim future. The instant sense of gratification AI now offers may well lead in the long term to the extinction of the authenticity of genuine academic writing. Now more than ever, therefore, it is important to teach students the basic skills of correct academic writing so they will be better able to understand and correct any such mistakes or awkwardness they encounter from using these programs.

Writing a Master's thesis is difficult and time consuming even in one's first language so writing one in a second language poses many distinctive challenges. Although the main purpose of this paper will focus on writing a thesis abstract, some parts will overlap with the writing of the actual thesis, since it must be written before the abstract can be created. Some of the problems students have when writing a thesis that can affect the structure and quality of an abstract will be presented here. For starters, it is important to know the role of each manuscript. The thesis is a broader, more complete look at a hypothesis with conclusions and interpretations evidently specified. An abstract, on the other hand, is a more concise, abridged overview or description of the thesis paper without judging or supporting the paper.

Many teachers state that Japanese university students lack writing skills as well as know-how. This is understandably multiplied when it comes time for the graduation thesis as students have never done the amount of writing needed to complete a thesis before this. This makes the abstract very important. The abstract is the first thing readers see and its importance lies in its ability to convince the reader to read the thesis and delve deeper into the content of the thesis. What do students need to know about writing a graduation thesis abstract in English? Can Japanese university students meet the needs of writing a graduation thesis abstract in English in a time of growing vitalness for better job qualifications in the international community? This paper offers a thesis abstract writing toolkit, offering some basic guidelines and concepts for guiding students through the thesis abstract-writing process.

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Developing Skills and Strategies

Developing a clear focus and well organized writing skills is important in writing a thesis because a thesis necessitates that your student not only research a specific topic in detail, but that he or she also chooses and reasons a point of view on it. Thesis writing is a specific academic mission with a distinct objective. It requires choosing a topic, finding more information about that topic, narrowing that topic, preparing an outline, and doing more research on the narrowed topic. The undertaking of thesis writing should be seen as a process of inquiry and a gathering of important and suitable information on the topic, including references to other writers' ideas. (Najar, Riley)

Getting the topic right from the start

One of the biggest mistakes students make is made right at the beginning of the thesis process: the decision on what the topic will be. The topic can make or break a student's paper and unfortunately most topics are confused with subjects. Subjects are wide-ranging and can usually be broken into several areas. Confusing a subject with a topic will make the literal topic be too general in scope. For example, something such as the history of music would be too broad and too general, as would a thesis on the history of plants. The subject must be narrowed down into a workable topic such as the creation of the electric guitar, or the conception of blue roses. Basically, subjects are broad and general; topics, on the other hand, should be a specific issue.

In other words, a limited, distinct topic is vital. A thesis should commence with the identification of a research area and then be whittled down into a specific or unique topic that students are interested in. Choosing a topic that sustains interest is important as students will be spending endless hours reading about it, writing about it, and analyzing the data they will collect. Correspondingly, they will be able to easily build on their ideas working with a faculty advisor equally interested in their topic.

It seems that much research done these days by Japanese university students functions as nothing more than to fill up pages. Advise students not to take this route. The research presented in the thesis must make a definite contribution, if not to the field of study in general, at least to the education of the student doing the research. Once the topic has been selected, it must be narrowed so that it can be dealt with completely and extensively. Before limiting a topic, however, the student must be aware of several factors that will affect the limitation—word limitation, preparation time, library facilities, and time needed for writing. (Arco)

- Start with a general subject of interest that fits the limitation of the thesis.
- Phrase the subject as a question.

- Brainstorm different parts of the subject to create a topic.
- Refer to different sources such as the library, reference books, magazines, friends, the media, and the World Wide Web.
- Sort through the ideas until he or she finds one that suits his or her taste.
- State the decided topic as a question.

The chosen topic should inform the reader as to why the questions posed should be asked in the first place and should build on prior research and theory. That makes recent literature in the area the simplest and most logical place to come up with researchable questions. (Cone, Foster)

The Premise of a thesis: the thesis statement

A thesis statement is a clear statement of the problem or issue to be discussed. Once the student has decided the area of his or her topic and the general questions to be asked, the student should formulate it in question form for study. After that, he or she should create a hypothesis. Hypotheses are declarative sentences that speculate a relationship between two or more variables. Hypotheses start with the basic research questions and develop a specific prediction about the nature of the relationship between the variables identified in the question. Continuing with this vein of thought, Cone and Foster offer these tips for coming up with and refining topics:

- Have the student select a general topic area
- Have the student work with faculty to develop his or her ideas
- Have the student develop the research question
- Have the student put the research question into a researchable form
- Have the student phrase the topic as a question
- Have the student make sure the question suggests a relationship to be examined
- Develop a hypothesis from this (Cone, Foster)

The next step, according to Cone and Foster, is to critique and review the literature on the topic. Murray says the objectives in this step are:

- To learn about it.
- To reveal areas that are ripe for development.
- To identify different methodologies and theoretical approaches.
- To work out where ideas come from (Murray).

Examining the Literature

While researching the literature, students should first locate the relevant literature. In this step they should identify key authors and key journals, use bibliographic reference sources, computerized literature searches, and use reference lists from articles, chapters, and books to do this.

Then, they need to critically read the literature to identify themes, strengths and weaknesses of the articles, as well as strengths and weaknesses of the field as a whole.

Reviewing the literature directs the student to becoming familiar with the existing (both past and present) literature on a specific topic. By performing a comprehensive literature review, students will be able to link what has been studied and said before and what their thesis will contribute. Many times, the front section of the thesis will be a summarization of the literature reviewed and then will explain how the student will add to the subject. (Natavi)

In thesis writing, it is crucial for students to be critical thinkers. The thesis supervisor should try to encourage students to think in advance about what a reviewing professor might say about the thesis in response to points that will be presented by the student. Encourage them to anticipate the assessments teachers will make and persuade them to knit these answers into their papers before the fact. (Cone, Foster)

The Abstract: not an introduction

Students should not confuse the abstract with an introduction. An introduction is just an outline of the main hypotheses and arguments that the thesis will present and the order in which they will be offered. After reading the introduction, the reader should have a clear idea of the thesis statement and what types of arguments will be discussed to support it. However, at the beginning of the writing process, more often than not, the student won't thus far comprehend these ideas completely. It will, however, or at least should be, much easier to write an introduction once all of the ideas in the thesis have been written out. Save the writing of the introduction for last. (Natavi)

Conversely, an abstract is a concise synopsis of the paper's contents. According to Madsen, it is objective in character and anywhere from 200 to 350 words. Abstracts are very important in that they are what most scholars turn to when evaluating whether to read further. The student's mission, then, is to prepare a concise account of the thesis that will tell the reader the following: what the research question is, why it is important, what theoretical framework was employed in the research, what data were collected, how they were analyzed, what special techniques were used, and what results were found. (Madsen)

When other researchers are looking at the literature on their topic, they may be looking at several to several hundred papers. To save time, they may only read the topic sentences and maybe a few lines before passing on the paper or possibly moving it to a "to be read later" pile. Therefore, making a good first

impression of the document through a strong abstract is important and allows readers to decide for themselves whether to continue reading. It also shows them what to look for in the body of the paper. The most useful abstracts tell the reader more than just list the contents of the document. An abstract should present as much as possible the capacity and value of the document, and also reveal its analysis.

The basics of abstract writing

The following is the backbone of the class: the basic skills necessary for abstract writing. The goal of this class is to learn how to write a good graduation thesis abstract in English but focuses on style and technique rather than content since a thesis itself hasn't been written by students. Thus, the examples and explanations used are quite simple and easy for students to understand. The techniques taught here, however simple they may be, can easily translate into effective and superior abstract practices.

An abstract in English is usually one extended paragraph ranging from roughly 250 to 300 words. Therefore, good paragraph writing skills work well when writing abstracts. There are three parts to writing a good paragraph (with interpretations for abstract writing in parenthesis): the topic sentence (the purpose of the study), the body (a description of the method and design of the research or study; the major findings or trends found as a result of the writer's analysis), and the closing sentence (a summary of the writer's interpretations and conclusions). The topic sentence is the most important part of the abstract. A researcher wants people to read his or her abstract. But when a researcher or a company personnel manager is looking at an abstract he or she may be too busy or have too many papers to read so he or she will only read the topic sentence of each paper. If the topic sentence is good, the reader will read on; if it is not good, he or she will throw away that abstract quickly without reading it and move on to the next paper. Hence, having a good topic sentence is crucial.

A good topic sentence captures the reader's interest and tells a good overview of what the rest of the paper will be about. The topic sentence gives the MAIN idea of the paragraph or paper being written. It is usually the first sentence in the paragraph or paper and should express an idea that can easily be written about in 250 words. The topic sentence should not be too general, or be too big of an idea. If it is, there will be too much to write about. For example, a topic sentence focusing on the history of Japan would be too general, too big. "The history of music" is very long and can't be written about in 250 words. But, a smaller, more specific topic on music such as "My favorite band is SMAP" would be better.

Also, a good topic sentence should have a clear focus. Here are some simple Topic Sentence examples with simple paragraphs:

Joseph and Tom are good friends. They walk to school every morning. After school, the boys ride their bikes and play games together. Sometimes, Joseph and Tom sleep at each other's house. The boys like to be together.

This is how you make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. First, you get two slices of bread. Next,

you spread peanut butter on one slice of the bread. Then you spread jelly on the other slice of bread. Last, you put the two slices together and you eat!

Dogs are wonderful pets to have. Dogs know how to do tricks. They love to run and play. Dogs are furry and very cute. They love to lick you when you hug them. They are fun to have.

My favorite holiday is Christmas. I like decorating my tree with lights. Santa Claus brings us nice presents. In the morning, we get to open our presents and play with our toys. Then our family eats a big dinner for Christmas. I love Christmas with my family.

I like to go shopping with my mom. She lets me buy my own clothes. I get to try on different shoes. My mom takes me to eat lunch. Then we look at toys in the toy store. When we leave, she lets me help her with the bags and we go home.

A good topic sentence will stand out and grab the attention and interest of the reader. Good topic sentences will result in the reader wanting to read further. And it will ensure that the writer's ideas and conclusions will be read by others. With these goals in mind, here are several styles students can use for topic sentences. Some examples of types of topic sentences are:

1. List Statements: A list statement tells the reader exactly what the paragraph will be about by listing three main ideas. For example: My favorite foods include sushi, steak, and broccoli.
2. Power Number Statements: Power Number Statements do not tell the readers each of the main ideas but use number words (many, few, a number of, four...) to present the general topic. For example: There are many things you can do to become a better English speaker.
3. Two Nouns and Two Commas: The Two Nouns and Two Commas style always starts with a noun (a person, place, or thing), describes it, and then makes a statement about it. The description part of the sentence is surrounded by commas (one before the description, and one after it). For example: Ansel Adams, a photographer, is the quintessential visual recorder of the Sierra Nevada.
4. Occasion Position: Occasion Position topic sentences start with an occasion and use words like when, whenever, although, even though, and they end with the writer's feeling on the topic. For example: Whenever people go to a baseball game, they always expect to be entertained.
5. Get Their Attention: These topic sentences try to grab the reader's attention by making a statement that is thought-provoking, controversial, or interesting. For example: "AllDay Pizza" serves the best pizza in West Japan.
6. If . . . then: If you enjoy good seafood, then visiting Shizuoka may be an place for you to visit.
7. Even though: Even though climbing mountains can be difficult, the reward of reaching the top is worth it.
8. Since: Since there are many mountains in Japan, hiking is an excellent summer sport for residents and visitors alike.

Next is learning how to use “Helper Words,” or “Cue Words” in thesis abstract writing. These “helper words” or “cue words” are very important as they allow the writer to “transition” from one idea to the next. “Helper words,” or “cue words” are expressions, or sayings, that connect ideas in the paper. These include:

Compare and Contrast

These two concepts are explained to students, such as compare means looking at the similarities of something, or the things that are the same. For example, apples and oranges are both fruit. Or, a cow is an animal and a horse is an animal as well. Contrast, on the other hand, means looking at the differences. For example, an apple is red but an orange is not. Or, a horse has a long neck; however, the cow does not. In a compare and contrast paragraph, students are asked to write about the similarities and differences between two or more people, places, things, or ideas. The purpose of a compare and contrast essay is to examine the differences and/or the similarities of two subjects.

The first assignment focuses only on similarities and this example is given: write an essay comparing the similarities of an iPhone and a computer. (This is just an example; the actual assignment is compare a watch and a clock.)

The helper or cue words (they don’t have to be used in this order) are:

is similar to

both

also

too

as well

is similar to: An iPhone is similar to a computer.

both: Both an iPhone and a computer can connect to the Internet.

also: A computer has a screen. An iPhone has a screen, also.

too: A Macintosh computer has a front-facing camera. The iPhone has a front-facing camera, too.

as well: An iPhone is easy to carry around. A laptop computer is portable and easy to carry around, as well.

Then, the next assignment focuses on only differences:

Example: write an essay comparing the differences of an iPhone and a computer. (This is just an example; the actual assignment is compare cats and dogs.)

The helper or cue words (they don’t have to be used in this order) are:

on the other hand

however

but

in contrast

differs from

while

unlike

on the other hand: A computer can be heavy. On the other hand, an iPhone is light.

however: However, because it is so small, an iPhone screen can be difficult to see clearly

but: An iPhone has a touch screen but a computer has a keyboard.

in contrast: In contrast to an iPhone, a computer is very big.

(Here students are given a special note: “Contrast means a BIG difference. Big and small, black and white, night and day. Colors like red and brown do not have much contrast because they are very similar. So use contrast to show a BIG difference.”)

differs from: An iPhone differs from a computer in that you can make a regular phone call with it.

while: While a computer can show a large video, an iPhone can only show a small one.

unlike: Unlike a computer, an iPhone is easy to carry around and is very convenient when traveling.

Students are then reminded to start off with a good, strong topic sentence and to use all of the Helper-Cue Words in their writing, trying to get as close to 250 words as possible. Also, writing topics could be changed freely to make assignments more motivational to students, using their hobbies or interests as writing themes. For example, one year, a student was interested in cars so his writing topics focused on cars. Another year, a student was interested in food, so her writing topics focused on food. Being flexible this way didn't take away from the value of the writing assignments; students still had to use the helper-cue words correctly in their writing. But their interest, motivation, and creativity did seem to improve.

Compare and contrast are followed in the course by sequence-order (writing topic: how to cook your favorite meal); cause and effect (writing topics: cause-why is a *kotatsu* so wonderful and effect-why do Japanese people eat a lot of rice and fish); and evaluation- recommendation (writing topic: should people be required by law to recycle). All of these lessons include the presentation of the appropriate helper-cue words with examples and explanations of each.

Once students have acquired and become familiar with these basic skills, they will be able to understand and use correctly the proficiencies necessary to write an appealing, well-written, and eye-catching thesis abstract. With these foundations, students will be able to distinguish an abstract from an introduction; they will be aware of the importance of a strong topic sentence that works best for their thesis hypothesis; and they will competently demonstrate their arguments more effectively.

Giving a good first impression of a thesis through a strong abstract is important and allows readers to decide for themselves whether to continue reading. It also shows them what to look for in the body of the thesis itself. The most useful abstracts tell the reader more than just a list of the contents of the document. An abstract should present as much as possible the capacity and value of the document. And knowing how to use these helper-cue words will make the English in the abstract flow and seem more natural, adding to the overall satisfaction of the reader.

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