

OXFORD CHESTER UNI OF HIGHER EDUCATION



HOW TO WRITE THE ABSTRACT

A Comprehensive Guide for Doctoral Candidates

Prepared for:

Doctorate Programme Students -All Disciplines

Academic Division

2026 Edition

Chapter 1: What is an Abstract?

An abstract is a concise, standalone summary of your doctoral thesis or research article. It is the first and sometimes the only section that readers, examiners, journal editors, and database indexers will read. For this reason, a well-crafted abstract is one of the most strategically important pieces of writing in your entire doctoral journey.

TIP

Your abstract is the window through which the world views your research. It must be accurate, informative, and compelling even in 300 words.

1.1 Definition and Purpose

The word abstract comes from the Latin *abstractum*, meaning 'a summary.' In academic research, an abstract serves several interconnected purposes:

- It helps readers decide whether to read the full thesis or paper.
- It enables indexing in academic databases (e.g., ProQuest, Scopus, Web of Science).
- It provides examiners with an immediate overview of your research contribution.
- It communicates your findings to practitioners and policymakers who may not read the full work.
- It serves as the official record of your research in university repositories and library catalogues.

1.2 The Abstract vs. the Introduction

Doctoral students frequently confuse the abstract with the introduction. They are fundamentally different in purpose and structure:

Feature	Abstract	Introduction
Position	Before the Introduction	Chapter 1 of thesis
Length	150–350 words	Several pages
Standalone?	Yes - fully self-contained	No - part of document
Contains findings?	Yes	Usually not
Contains references?	No	Yes
Purpose	Summarise entire study	Set the context and gap

1.3 Types of Abstracts

There are two principal types of abstracts used in doctoral research:

Descriptive Abstract

A descriptive abstract (100–150 words) outlines what the study does and covers without revealing the results or conclusions. These are rarely used in doctoral theses but may appear in conference proposals.

Informative Abstract

An informative abstract (200–350 words) is the standard for doctoral theses and journal articles. It summarises the purpose, methodology, key findings, and conclusions of the study. This is the type you will write for your thesis.

NOTE

Unless your supervisor or institution specifies otherwise, always write an INFORMATIVE abstract for your doctoral thesis.

Chapter 2: The Five Essential Components

A well-structured doctoral abstract consistently contains five core components. Think of these as five questions your abstract must answer for the reader:

	Component	Key Question Answered
1	Background / Context	Why does this research matter? What problem or gap exists?
2	Aims & Objectives	What did your study set out to do? What were the research questions?
3	Methodology	How did you conduct the research? What approach and methods were used?
4	Results / Findings	What did you discover? What are the key outcomes?
5	Conclusions & Implications	What do the findings mean? What contribution do they make?

2.1 Background and Context

Begin by briefly orienting the reader to the subject area and the research problem. Establish why the study is necessary. You should answer: What is the broader field? What gap, problem, or controversy motivated this study? Why is it significant now?

- Keep background to 1–2 sentences maximum.
- Do not provide a literature review — just name the core gap.
- Avoid excessive jargon; write for an educated non-specialist reader.

☒ GOOD EXAMPLE — Background Statement

Despite extensive theoretical development in strategic human resource management, empirical research on the relationship between talent retention practices and organisational performance in small and medium enterprises (SMEs) within South Asian emerging economies remains limited.

2.2 Aims and Objectives

Clearly state the purpose of your research. Use direct, active language. The reader should understand the scope and boundaries of your study in a single sentence.

- State the primary aim first, then objectives if space allows.
- Use precise action verbs: investigates, examines, explores, evaluates, develops, tests.
- Avoid vague phrases such as 'this study looks at' or 'this research is about.'

☑ GOOD EXAMPLE -Aims Statement

This study investigates the effect of transformational leadership on employee engagement and examines its implications for organisational performance in privately-owned SMEs operating in Sri Lanka's manufacturing sector.

✗ POOR EXAMPLE - Weak Aims Statement

This study is about leadership in companies and how it affects workers in Sri Lanka.

2.3 Methodology

Summarise the research design, approach, data collection methods, and analytical techniques. The methodology section reassures the reader and the examiner that your conclusions rest on rigorous and appropriate methods.

- Name your paradigm if relevant (positivist, interpretivist, pragmatist).
- State your research design (e.g., mixed methods, case study, survey-based).
- Indicate the sample size and selection method.
- Mention the key analytical tool or technique.

☑ GOOD EXAMPLE -Methodology Statement

Employing a mixed-methods research design, this study collected primary data through structured questionnaires administered to 215 employees across 18 SMEs in the Western Province and semi-structured interviews with 12 owner-managers. Quantitative data were analysed using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM), while thematic analysis was applied to qualitative responses.

2.4 Results and Findings

This is the most critical component of your abstract. Report the key findings directly and specifically. Do not be vague. Examiners and reviewers will assess whether your study actually produced meaningful, credible results.

⚠ WARNING

Your findings section is where many doctoral abstracts fail. Be specific include data, statistics, or clearly articulated outcomes. Never write 'results show interesting patterns' or 'findings were mostly positive.'

- Report the 2–3 most significant findings.
- Use quantitative values where applicable (e.g., 'a 34% improvement in...').
- Relate findings directly to the research objectives.

✓ GOOD EXAMPLE- Findings Statement

Findings reveal that transformational leadership significantly predicts employee engagement ($\beta = 0.68$, $p < 0.001$) and accounts for 46% of variance in organisational performance outcomes. Qualitative data further indicate that vision articulation and personalised coaching are the dominant leadership behaviours driving engagement in resource-constrained SME settings.

✗ POOR EXAMPLE -Weak Findings Statement

The results showed that leadership has a positive impact on employees and many participants agreed with this.

2.5 Conclusions and Implications

Close the abstract by stating what the findings mean. What is the scholarly contribution? What are the practical or policy implications? Does the study call for further research?

- State the primary conclusion in 1–2 sentences.
- Reference the theoretical or practical contribution.
- Suggest implications for practice, policy, or future research.
- Do not introduce new information here.

✓ GOOD EXAMPLE - Conclusion Statement

The study concludes that transformational leadership constitutes a critical strategic lever for SMEs seeking to build a committed, high-performing workforce in competitive emerging markets. Findings contribute to Full Range Leadership Theory by demonstrating its applicability within the SME context of a South Asian developing economy. Business owners and HR practitioners are advised to invest in structured leadership development programmes that emphasise individualised consideration and inspirational motivation.

Chapter 3: Length, Language, and Style

3.1 Word Count Guidelines

Word count requirements vary by context. The following guidelines apply in most doctoral contexts:

Context	Word Count	Notes
PhD / DBA Thesis	250–350 words	Most institutions specify 300 words
Journal Article (SSCI / Scopus)	150–250 words	Check journal guidelines
Conference Paper	150–200 words	Often stricter; check CFP
Book Chapter	100–150 words	Varies by publisher
Research Proposal	200–300 words	May be labelled 'executive summary'

NOTE

Always check your institution's official thesis formatting guidelines. Oxford Chester's doctoral programme requires abstracts of 300 words or fewer.

3.2 Tense Guidelines

Tense usage in abstracts follows convention. Incorrect tense signals a lack of academic writing maturity. Use the following as your guide:

Abstract Component	Recommended Tense	Example
Background / Context	Present tense	Employee turnover in SMEs remains a persistent challenge in...
Aims & Objectives	Simple past or present	This study examines / This study examined...
Methodology	Simple past	Data were collected from 200 participants...
Findings	Simple past	Results revealed a significant relationship...
Conclusions	Present tense	The study concludes that... / This research suggests...

3.3 Voice: Active vs. Passive

Academic convention has historically favoured the passive voice in abstracts, but contemporary guidance particularly in business, management, and applied sciences increasingly endorses the active voice for clarity and impact.

☑ GOOD EXAMPLE -Active Voice

This study surveyed 280 employees across 20 manufacturing firms and identified four determinants of organisational commitment.

✗ POOR EXAMPLE - Passive Voice

Two hundred and eighty employees across 20 manufacturing firms were surveyed and four determinants of organisational commitment were identified.

💡 TIP

Use active voice as your default. Switch to passive only when the agent (who did the action) is less important than the action itself which is rare in doctoral abstracts.

3.4 Common Language Errors to Avoid

The following errors are frequently observed in doctoral abstracts. Correct them before submission:

✗ Error / Weak Phrase	☑ Preferred Alternative
This paper will discuss...	This paper examines / investigates...
The study tried to find out...	The study aimed to determine / identify...
Results were very interesting...	Results revealed / demonstrated / indicated...
Findings show a lot of improvement...	Findings show a 28% improvement in...
The researcher believes that...	The study concludes that...
In conclusion, the study shows...	The study concludes / establishes that...
This research is important because...	This research contributes to / addresses...
Some limitations were found...	The study is limited by its cross-sectional design...

Chapter 4: Step-by-Step Writing Process

Writing a doctoral abstract is both a cognitive and strategic task. The following eight-step process has been developed to guide you from blank page to polished, submission-ready abstract.

Step 1 Write the Abstract LAST

Despite appearing first in your thesis, the abstract should be written after you have completed the full document. Only then can you accurately summarise what the study actually found and concluded. Writing the abstract early leads to overpromising, inaccuracy, and misalignment with the actual thesis content.

WARNING

Many doctoral students make the mistake of writing a draft abstract during the proposal stage and forgetting to update it after the final thesis is complete. Always re-write your abstract from scratch once the study is done.

Step 2 Re-read Your Thesis Strategically

Before writing, re-read these four specific sections of your completed thesis and take brief notes on the key content of each:

- Chapter 1 (Introduction): What is the research gap and purpose?
- Chapter 3 (Methodology): What design, methods, and sample did you use?
- Chapter 4/5 (Findings): What are the 2–3 most significant results?
- Chapter 5/6 (Discussion/Conclusion): What are the main conclusions and contributions?

Step 3 Draft Each Component Separately

Do not try to write the abstract as a single flowing paragraph on the first attempt. Instead, draft each of the five components (Background, Aims, Methods, Findings, Conclusions) as a separate sentence or two. You will blend them in Step 5.

TIP

Working sentence-by-sentence removes the psychological pressure of writing a 'perfect paragraph.' Each sentence needs only to answer one question clearly.

Step 4 Write a Component Sentence Map

Before drafting, complete this planning template (adapt it to your own study):

Component	Your Draft Sentence(s) Write Here
Background / Context	
Research Aim / Objectives	
Research Design & Methods	
Key Findings (2–3 points)	
Conclusions & Implications	

Step 5 Assemble and Edit for Flow

Combine your five drafted components into a single paragraph. Then read it aloud and ask yourself:

- Does one component flow naturally into the next?
- Have I used appropriate transition words (e.g., 'Building on these findings...', 'To achieve this aim...')?
- Does the abstract read as a coherent narrative, not a list of sentences?
- Is every sentence necessary? Can I remove any without losing meaning?

Step 6 Count and Trim

Once drafted, count the words. If you exceed the permitted limit, trim by:

- Removing adjectives and adverbs that do not add meaning ('extremely significant' → 'significant').
- Replacing multi-word phrases with single words ('in order to' → 'to'; 'due to the fact that' → 'because').

- Cutting the least important supporting finding from your results section.
- Removing institutional context unless essential (e.g., country-specific framing).

Step 7 Check Against Your Thesis

Before finalising, place your abstract side by side with your thesis and verify:

- Every claim in the abstract appears in the thesis.
- No finding is mentioned in the abstract that does not appear in Chapters 4 or 5.
- The theoretical framework referenced in the abstract matches what is used in Chapter 2.
- Sample size, country/context, and methodology details match Chapter 3 exactly.

WARNING

Discrepancies between the abstract and the thesis body are a red flag for examiners. They signal either carelessness or last-minute changes that were not fully integrated.

Step 8 Add Keywords

Most institutions and journals require a list of 4–8 keywords immediately below the abstract. Keywords are used for database indexing and should reflect:

- The central theoretical concept (e.g., Dynamic Capabilities; Institutional Theory).
- The core topic or phenomenon (e.g., Corporate Social Responsibility; Strategic HRM).
- The research method, if distinctive (e.g., Structural Equation Modelling; Grounded Theory).
- The geographic or sectoral context, if specific (e.g., Sri Lanka; Manufacturing SMEs).

GOOD EXAMPLE - Keywords

Transformational Leadership; Employee Engagement; Organisational Performance; SMEs; Mixed Methods; Structural Equation Modelling; Sri Lanka

Chapter 5: Full Annotated Abstract Examples

The following examples demonstrate complete doctoral abstracts across three disciplines represented in Oxford Chester's Doctorate Programme. Each example is followed by a brief analytical commentary.

Research Topic: Corporate Social Responsibility and Firm Financial Performance in Sri Lankan Listed Companies

SAMPLE ABSTRACT

[Background] The relationship between corporate social responsibility (CSR) engagement and firm financial performance has generated considerable scholarly debate, yet empirical evidence from South Asian capital markets, particularly Sri Lanka, remains largely inconclusive and methodologically fragmented. **[Aim]** This study examines the effect of voluntary CSR disclosure on financial performance among companies listed on the Colombo Stock Exchange (CSE) and investigates the moderating role of firm size and industry sector in this relationship. **[Method]** Using a quantitative longitudinal design, secondary financial and CSR disclosure data were collected from 86 CSE-listed firms over a seven-year period (2016–2022). Panel data regression analysis with fixed and random effects was applied, supplemented by content analysis of annual reports to construct the CSR disclosure index. **[Findings]** Results demonstrate a statistically significant positive relationship between CSR disclosure and Return on Assets ($\beta = 0.34, p < 0.01$) and Tobin's Q ($\beta = 0.29, p < 0.05$). Firm size significantly moderates this relationship, with large-cap firms deriving greater financial benefit from CSR investment. No significant moderating effect was found for industry sector. **[Conclusions]** The study concludes that strategic CSR investment enhances long-term firm value and supports the business case for sustainability in emerging capital markets. Findings contribute to Stakeholder Theory by demonstrating its explanatory power within a South Asian institutional context. Corporate boards and investors are advised to treat CSR disclosure as a value-relevant signal rather than a compliance exercise.

Keywords: Corporate Social Responsibility; CSR Disclosure; Firm Financial Performance; Stakeholder Theory; Panel Data Regression; Colombo Stock Exchange; Sri Lanka

NOTE

Analysis: This abstract follows the five-component structure precisely. Notice how each component is kept concise yet specific the β values, significance levels, and named financial ratios (ROA, Tobin's Q) make the findings credible, and the theoretical contribution (Stakeholder Theory) is explicitly named.

Chapter 6: Common Mistakes and Final Checklist

6.1 The Ten Most Common Abstract Mistakes

Avoid these errors, which are routinely flagged by examiners and journal reviewers:

	Mistake
1	Writing the abstract before completing the thesis — leads to inaccurate claims.
2	Omitting the findings — perhaps the single most common and serious error.
3	Being vague about methodology — 'surveys were used' is insufficient.
4	Including citations or references — abstracts must be self-contained.
5	Exceeding the word limit — signals poor editing skills to examiners.
6	Using abbreviations without prior definition within the abstract.
7	Copying sentences verbatim from the thesis body — the abstract should be freshly written.
8	Failing to state the research gap or rationale for the study.
9	Using future tense ('the study will...') — the research is completed; use past or present tense.
10	Making claims in the abstract that are not supported in the thesis body.

6.2 Final Submission Checklist

Before submitting your thesis or article, verify each item in this checklist:

✓	Checklist Item
☐	The abstract was written AFTER the full thesis was completed.
☐	All five components are present: Background, Aims, Method, Findings, Conclusions.
☐	The word count is within the required limit (check institutional guidelines).
☐	No citations or reference numbers appear in the abstract.
☐	Specific findings are reported with data, statistics, or clearly articulated outcomes.
☐	Appropriate tense is used (past for methods/findings; present for background/conclusions).
☐	No abbreviations are used without first being defined within the abstract.
☐	All claims in the abstract can be verified in the thesis body.
☐	Keywords (4–8) have been listed below the abstract.
☐	The abstract has been proofread and is free of grammatical or typographical errors.
☐	The abstract has been read aloud to check for flow, readability, and coherence.
☐	A trusted colleague or supervisor has reviewed the abstract and provided feedback.

Recommended Further Reading

The following texts are recommended for doctoral students seeking deeper guidance on academic writing and abstract construction:

- Swales, J.M. & Feak, C.B. (2004). *Academic Writing for Graduate Students: Essential Tasks and Skills* (2nd ed.). University of Michigan Press.
- Murray, R. (2017). *How to Write a thesis* (4th ed.). Open University Press / McGraw-Hill Education.
- Glasman-Deal, H. (2010). *Science Research Writing for Non-Native Speakers of English*. Imperial College Press.
- Wallwork, A. (2011). *English for Writing Research Papers*. Springer.
- American Psychological Association (2020). *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (7th ed.). APA.
- Dunleavy, P. (2003). *Authoring a PhD: How to Plan, Draft, Write and Finish a Doctoral Thesis or Dissertation*. Palgrave Macmillan.