Why We Write Abstracts for APS Meetings—and How We Can Do It Better

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I'm frequently asked how to write a good abstract for a meeting. I have never been asked why. Yet unless an author starts with a clear idea of why he or she is writing, then the process can seem cramped and forced from the outset. This article is intended as a brief guide for anyone who wants to make the process more natural and enjoyable and to improve the outcome both for the author and the audience.

The why

An abstract serves two main purposes. First and most important, your abstract should draw an audience to your work. To draw a larger audience, the abstract has to speak coherently to a broader readership. You will never know who finds some aspect of your work interesting until you make it accessible to readers and make them want to hear more about it. This doesn't entail dumbing down your work. Rather, it requires revealing your work through a broad focus and providing context and clarity.

Second, your abstract is a written record of your presentation, whether it's a preliminary or comprehensive study. This is the only rationale for publishing an abstract beyond the meeting program. The abstract exists to encapsulate the foundational truth of your presentation.

The how

How to write a good abstract is most easily conveyed as a series of bulleted points. Call them "rules" if you like. The list is not long, and not every rule will apply in every case. But if you keep the "why" in mind as you write and make a good faith effort to follow these rules, then over time and with experience, your writing will improve. Someday, you may find yourself teaching these guidelines to others:

- *Allow sufficient time.* If there's a chance you will present at an APS meeting, start thinking about your presentation at least 1 month before the abstract submission deadline. Leave time to incorporate suggestions from a diverse readership.
- *Study the work of good writers and see how they do it.* Read a few abstracts from past meetings in the annual supplements of *Phytopathology.* These are miniature examples of communicating science effectively.
- *Don't write for your lab group.* Your current professional network will likely show up at your talk or poster regardless, but your network will expand more rapidly if you write for a broader audience. Avoid jargon, technobabble, and undefined and obscure acronyms.
- *Make the title interesting.* A sterile title doesn't compete well for attention when an audience has many options. Don't trivialize the subject matter, but use the title to attract attention to your work.
- *Make your abstract easy to find.* Think broadly of a few keywords that should appear in your title or narrative to make it more discoverable by apps, search functions for PDFs, and search engines.
- *Minimize the methods.* Even if your study concerns a new and improved method, the benefits and impacts of that method are probably more important and interesting to the reader. If people want more detail, they will contact you. First, they need to be persuaded to join your audience.
- *To the extent possible, provide context for your specific study with respect to broader themes in plant pathology.* Taking a short, linear path to a clearly stated objective is sometimes an effective and efficient way to provide this context, but it's not the only way. Make it personal: Why should an audience member care about your work?
- *Keep the focus on the major finding(s) and take-home message.* Having 1,300–1,500 characters in which to tell a story requires economy of language. In the words of Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Every word must tell." However, first write for effect and content. Then edit ruthlessly for clarity and conciseness. Don't worry excessively about the length of the abstract until you have a complete draft. Then refine, refine, refine.
- *Write in a style that's accessible to and engages a broad audience.* This article includes an abstract of a presentation made in 2007 at the APS Annual Meeting in San Diego. Not every story can be told in this manner, but the goals were to make the technical aspects of tritrophic interactions in biological control accessible and attractive to a broad audience and to provide a written record of the major finding. The abstract assumes familiarity with common mycology and ecology terms but not more.

No abstract is a perfect embodiment of every principle, recommendation, or rule. For example, a colleague of mine pointed out that the fourth sentence in the sample abstract is quite a mouthful and hardly a model of simple declarative construction. He was also no fan of the "will be discussed" promise in the final sentence. Space constraints sometimes force compromise. Nonetheless, attention rather than inattention to the above "tricks of the trade" will improve outcomes for both authors and audiences. ■

SAMPLE ABSTRACT

Very Small Sheep: How Tydeid Mites Interact with Powdery Mildews and Plant Hosts.

David M. Gadoury, R. C. Seem, W. F. Wilcox, G. Loeb, A. P. Norton. and H. Melidossian.

Powdery mildews are a unique class of biotrophic fungal plant pathogens whose thallus, with the exception of haustoria in epidermal cells, is wholly external to their host. As such, they are especially susceptible to grazing by mycophagous mites in the family Tydeidae. One Tydeid species (*Orthotydeus lambi)* provides partial control of grape powdery mildew (*Uncinula necator*). Field and laboratory experiments on ten different grape cultivars provided evidence of a tritrophic interaction, in which *U. necator* served as a food source for *O. lambi*, the host plant benefited from suppression of disease, and *O. lambi* benefited from the presence of a complex arrangement of leaf trichomes in vein axils (domatia), which provided refuges from predators. *O. lambi* substantially reduced powdery mildew on grapevine foliage and fruit, although the magnitude of disease suppression was greater on some cultivars than others, depending on mite density and innate susceptibility to grape powdery mildew. Maintaining dense and effective populations of *O. lambi* required careful selection of pesticides applied against powdery mildew and other members of the pest complex on grapevine. The potential of *O. lambi* for biological control of powdery mildews and inherent limitations of the system for commercially relevant disease suppression will be discussed.