Writing conference abstracts

Shigeto Kawahara

1 Background

(1) One of your important tasks as a graduate student is to present your work at conferences.

(2) Your conference abstracts will usually be reviewed by 3 or 4 reviewers.

(3) The acceptance rates vary a lot, but it can be as low as lower than 20%.

(4) So you want to know how to write a good abstract.

2 Questions that reviewers get

(5) Typical questions conference reviewers get

a. Does the abstract offer a substantive and original proposal?
b. Are the details of the author's proposal adequately developed and explained?
c. Does the paper make substantial contributions to the field?
d. Is the paper relevant enough to our conference?[1]
e. Comments to the author
f. Comments to the organizers (confidential to the author)

(6) In short, they want an original, complete, and interesting abstract.

3 Elements of conference abstracts

(7) 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)

(8) 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?"

[1] For example, I have received a comment from an anonymous reviewer saying: "I like the experiments, but I don't think NELS is the place to present this project."

c. Briefly explain what your proposal is.

d. Don't write a mystery novel. Tell what your idea is as soon as possible.

(9) 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.

(10) 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.

(11) Discussion

a. Comparison with alternatives.

b. Don't say, "This paper shows evidence against X's theory"; instead, always say, "This paper shows evidence for Y, and compares it with X".[2]

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".

(12) 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.

4 Other stylistic tips

(13) 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").

(14) Typesetting

a. Minimal 12 pt.

[2]Relatedly, it is a bad sign if your title is "Against X". Your project may start by disagreeing with some other theory, but your goal is to create your own theory.

b. Lots of margins.
c. Some space around your figures, tables, diagrams, and examples.
d. Clear subheadings.
e. Extra line between each paragraph.
f. You can put your title in the header.
g. Embed fonts.

(15) 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 on their computer screen.
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 X's analysis" etc).

(16) Get help

a. Start early and get comments from your advisors and friends.
b. Faculty members are the typical reviewers! They (should) know what's good and what's 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