Writing Effective Abstracts

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Disseminating research findings, practical clinical approaches, or new practice models through oral and poster presentations at SUNA’s upcoming Annual Symposium for Disorders of the Bladder, Bowel and Pelvic Floor scheduled for March 2-5, 2005 and annual national conference is an important method for advancing nursing knowledge in a timely manner. Preparing an abstract is the first step in disseminating one’s scholarly work or clinical innovation for presentation at these meetings. Abstracts are selected for presentation at conferences based upon their quality, originality, and significance to urologic nursing practice by a special committee of the conference or symposium planning committee.

Although abstracts are brief, they can be difficult to write because they require condensing extensive and detailed information into a very short document. Writing a clear, concise, yet descriptive abstract is critical to having your research or clinical innovation project accepted for presentation at a meeting. Think of the abstract as “marketing” or “selling” your research or ideas to an audience. You must be able to quickly capture the interest of the readers so that so that peer reviewers will select your abstract for presentation at the conference and conference participants will choose to attend your presentation or poster session. The abstract must be carefully crafted to communicate key points using a minimum of words so that methods and results are clearly conveyed even to those who cannot attend the presentation. This article provides guidelines for preparing abstracts for submission to SUNA conferences. All abstracts
are required to follow a standard one-page format with headers that include title, purpose/aim, context, methods, results, conclusion, implications, and statement of funding sources (see accompanying Call for Abstracts). Always read and follow directions carefully regarding who can submit abstracts; special submission requirements needed such as a statement of disclosure and the identification of the presenter’s role; typing instructions; the number of copies required that do not contain identifying information (for blinded peer review) and those copies that do require it; and the abstract deadline and submission method.

Selecting a focus for development of an abstract is a critical step. Be sure to select a focus that is not too narrow where the significance to the conference topic is minor or unclear; yet not too large a focus where the significance gets lost in all the detail provided. Suggestions for the components of the abstract format are provided below.

**Title**—The title should be short and clearly depict the nature of the study or project. A good title for a research report would contain the independent variable (the cause), the dependent variable (the result) and the population studied, i.e., Effect of Constipation on Urinary Incontinence in Nursing Home Residents. A title for a clinical innovation would contain a description of the innovation and clearly convey the project’s significance, e.g., A New Approach for Pessary Management.

**Purpose/Aim**—The major purpose or aim of the study/project/approach/or strategy should be concisely worded in one sentence (if possible), and be stated in measurable terms. An example for a research project might be: “The aim of this study was to test the effect of a behavioral management program in the prevention of urinary incontinence in perimenopausal women.” The aim should identify the specific outcomes
that are being measured, e.g., urinary or fecal incontinence, quality of life, patient satisfaction, pelvic floor muscle strength, urodynamic parameters, costs, etc. For a clinical strategy, an example of an aim might be “to describe a new method of collecting urine specimens from immobilized patients.”

**Context**—The context of the study or project provides a description of the setting and the target population. To maintain confidentiality, research studies typically do not name specific institutions or cities, however, these can be generally named, e.g., a tertiary care center in a large Midwestern city. The context could describe a project being conducted within an acute care, clinic, home care, nursing home, home care or other long term care setting. The type of population should be specified such as: community-dwelling older female population or a post-radical prostatectomy population. It is also possible the project could be conducted as a secondary data analysis of a larger project in which the original project would have to be noted.

**Methods**—The methods section provides an information summary of the project’s procedures. For research projects, this section should include the type of research design (e.g., prospective, retrospective, descriptive, qualitative, case series, experimental, quasi-experimental), sampling strategy (method of selection), intervention (if relevant, the brief details), measurement instrument(s) or approach, and statistical tests (name of tests used and for what purpose). For a clinical innovation project, it should provide a description of the who, what, when, and why (Biancuzzo, 1994). The “who” would describe who carried out the project. The “what” would describe the intervention. It might also be helpful to identify “when” the project was conducted. The “why” is a brief statement of the existing problem and is usually in direct contrast to the overall goal of the project.
For example, “Because no program existed, a APN established a clinical program for female sexual dysfunction during the fall of 2002. A clinical innovation project should also list the steps of the process including a needs assessment, resources used, planning involved, and the evaluation process used. If a theoretical or conceptual framework was used in the assessment or program development, it should be identified. Resources may include human or material resources. Planning would include meetings, preparation of the physical environment, etc. The evaluation process including the outcomes used should be noted.

**Results**—For a research project, this section summarizes the characteristics of the study population, the major outcomes according to the study aims, and highlights any new findings. Results should be presented using statistics and significance levels in a concise and specific way. For example, it is not specific enough to say that the “participants in the bladder training group significantly reduced their urinary incontinence episodes as compared to the control group.” It would be better to say: “participants in the bladder training group had significantly greater reductions in their mean" standard deviation (SD) incontinent episodes from baseline to follow-up, respectively (21" 20, 9" 11) as compared to the control group (22" 20, 19" 17) (P=.0001).

**Conclusion**—This section summarizes the major lessons learned from the study/project/approach/strategy in relationship to the purpose/aim(s). Avoid restating or overstating the results. Instead write broad conclusions generalizing from the specific results or experience learned about the particular problem, intervention, instrument, or innovation to the wider world, e.g., similar setting and population. The conclusions must follow directly from the results presented.
Implications—This section discusses the relevance of the research findings or the project outcomes to urologic nursing and future effects on nursing practice.

Once you have written your abstract, ask several colleagues to critique your abstract using the SUNA guidelines and make any corrections based on the feedback you receive. Often, several revisions are needed to improve the clarity of your writing and the overall quality of the abstract. Be sure to edit carefully and prune superfluous words and phrases (Lindquist, 1993). Allowing sufficient time for multiple revisions is important as well as time to do final proofing and checking of the accuracy of all information.

After you have your research abstract accepted and presented, you have not yet completed the dissemination phase of your scholarly work or clinical innovation. You need to take the next step, and write up the presentation for publication in *Urologic Nursing* so that even a greater number of people can have benefit from your knowledge and work!

References
