UNIT 4: WRITING THE ABSTRACT

Economics and Econometrics Corpus --- 149 abstracts

OVERVIEW

The abstract is the most-read part of your paper. Journal editors use it to select reviewers. Reviewers read it before deciding how carefully to engage with the manuscript. Readers scanning a journal's table of contents use it to decide whether to download the paper. Conference organisers use it to accept or reject submissions. Despite this, some writers treat the abstract as an afterthought: a hasty summary written minutes before submission.

ABSTRACT LENGTH

Most economics abstracts run to 120-170 words.

Range	Count	Share
Under 80 words	3	3%
80--120 words	32	30%
120--160 words	33	31%
160--200 words	25	24%
Over 200 words	13	12%

The median is 141 words, the mean 150. If your target journal specifies a word limit (typically 100-150 or 150-200 words), follow it. If no limit is specified, aim for 120-160 words. An abstract under 100 words may feel thin; one over 200 may be trying to do too much. Pure theory papers tend toward shorter abstracts (often under 120 words). Applied empirical papers with multiple findings tend toward longer ones (150-200 words).

THE FOUR MOVES OF THE ECONOMICS ABSTRACT

The abstract compresses your Introduction's argument into a single paragraph. It should contain four elements, typically in this order:

Move 1: Context (1-2 sentences). What is the topic or question?

Why does it matter? This corresponds to Move 1 (Territory) in the Introduction, but compressed to a sentence or two.

Move 2: What the paper does (1-2 sentences). What is your approach, your method, model, or data? This is your contribution statement.

Move 3: Key findings (2-3 sentences). What do you find? Be specific and include directions and magnitudes where possible. Vague findings ("we find significant effects") tell the reader nothing.

Move 4: Implication (0-1 sentence). What does it mean? A brief statement of broader significance or policy implication. This move is optional, about half of abstracts use it.

The gap (Move 2 of the Introduction) is usually implicit in the abstract rather than stated explicitly. The transition from context to contribution implies that existing work has not done what your paper does.

TENSE

The abstract tend to use present simple throughout. In the corpus, 68% of abstracts use present simple "we + verb" constructions; only 2% use past simple. Present perfect ("We have shown…") belongs in the Conclusion, not the abstract. The past tense may be used in a real world description. See the examples below

HOW ABSTRACTS OPEN

Opening pattern	Share
World-first (topic statement)	53%
"We" + verb	28%
"This paper" + verb	17%

The world-first opening mirrors the Introduction convention:

"Lower-income countries spend vast sums on subsidies."
"Intellectual property accounts for a growing share of firms' assets."

> *"Inequality in wealth among elderly households, and in particular the prevalence of very low wealth holdings, can be an important consideration in the design of social insurance programs."*

The "we" opening gets to the contribution faster:

> *"We examine the effects of employee and employer social security contributions on labor cost, hours of work, and labor cost per hour, using a long running panel dataset..."*
>
> *"We study the effects of the recent economic crisis on firms' bidding behavior and markups in sealed bid auctions."*
>
> *"We study household income inequality in both Great Britain and the United States and the interplay between labour market earnings and the tax system."*

The "This paper" opening is another option:

> *"This paper estimates the magnitudes of government spending and tax multipliers within a regime-switching framework for the U.S."*
>
> *"This paper investigates the impact of attention driven behaviour on agricultural commodity prices."*

All three patterns work. One common pattern consists of a real world statement followed immediately by a "We + verb" sentence.

Strategy	Share	Example
Broad statement	37%	Beginning with the economic setup or environment
"We" + verb	30%	"We consider an economy with N agents..."
"This section"	19%	"This section presents the model."

A PURE THEORY EXAMPLE

> *"Two firms engage in price competition to attract buyers located on a network."*
>
> *[Move 1: Context --- the model setup]*

Pure theory abstracts often establish context by describing the model environment rather than a real-world phenomenon. The setup is the territory; the theoretical result is the finding.

58% of abstracts in the corpus preview at least one specific finding. When you include a finding, be specific:

Specific (good): "We find that customs modernisation increases bilateral trade by 12-15%, with effects concentrated in differentiated goods."

Vague (weak): "We find significant effects of customs modernisation on trade."

The specific version tells the reader two things the vague version does not: the magnitude and the heterogeneity.

An Annotated Example

Consider this abstract from the corpus (196 words):

Move 1. Context (real-world statement):

> *"The relative return to strategies that augment inputs versus those that reduce inefficiencies remains a key open question for education policy in low-income countries."*

Move 2. What the paper does (implicitly establishing the gap):

> *"Using a new nationally-representative panel dataset of schools across 1297 villages in India, we show that the large public investments in education over the past decade have led to substantial improvements in input-based measures of school quality, but only a modest reduction in inefficiency as measured by teacher absence."*

Move 3. Key finding:

> *"In our data, 23.6% of teachers were absent during unannounced school visits, and we estimate that the salary cost of unauthorized teacher absence is $1.5 billion/year."*

This abstract follows a three-move structure efficiently: context, contribution/gap, finding. It leads with the world (*Education policy in low-income countries*), states what the paper does, and previews the finding

with a specific claim.

A Second Example

Moves 1-2 combined: context + what the paper does

> "In a novel experimental design, we study public good games with dynamic interdependencies, where each agent's wealth at the end of period t serves as her endowment in t + 1."
> **[Significance]**
> "In this setting, growth and inequality arise endogenously allowing us to address new questions regarding their interplay and effect on cooperation."

Move 3: Key finding

> "We find that amounts contributed are increasing over time even in the absence of punishment possibilities."

This abstract combines context and method in the opening sentence, which is a common pattern in experimental papers.

As noted above, pure theory abstracts typically describe the model environment rather than a real-world phenomenon in setting up the context for the abstract.

The Abstract as Filter

Think of the abstract as serving three different readers simultaneously. The editor uses it to assign reviewers: it should clearly signal the paper's field, method, and contribution. The reviewer uses it to frame expectations: what should they be looking for? The casual reader uses it to decide whether to download: does the finding matter to them? If your abstract serves all three readers, it is doing its job.

Writing the Abstract: A Step-by-Step Process

Step 1: Write the context sentence (Move 1). In one sentence, name the topic and why it matters. Use the world-first opening: "Trade barriers impose significant costs on developing economies" rather than "This paper examines trade barriers."

Step 2: Write the method sentence (Move 2). In one sentence, state what the paper does: "We exploit the staggered implementation of customs reforms across 45 countries to identify the causal effect of trade facilitation on bilateral trade flows."

Step 3: Write the results sentences (Move 3). In 2-3 sentences, state what you find. Be specific: include directions, magnitudes, and the most important heterogeneity. "We find that customs modernisation increases bilateral trade by 12-15%. Effects are concentrated in differentiated goods and are larger for country pairs with previously high trade costs."

Step 4: Write the implication sentence (Move 4, optional). In one sentence, state what the finding means: "These results suggest that administrative trade barriers are a significant impediment to trade and that customs reform can be an effective policy tool for trade promotion."

Step 5: Edit for length. Count words. If over the journal's limit (or over 160 words), cut the context sentence first --- it carries the least information. Then trim the results to the single most important finding. Then cut the implication if needed. The method and main result should be the last things you cut.

Step 6: Check tense. The parts of the abstract describing your article should be in present simple tense throughout: "We find…" not "We found…" or "We have found…"

Step 7: Cross-check with the Introduction. The abstract should promise the same paper the Introduction delivers. Same main finding, same framing, same magnitudes.

KEYWORDS AND JEL CODES

Most economics journals require JEL classification codes and keywords. Choose 2-3 JEL codes that best describe your paper's field and method. Choose 4-6 keywords that a researcher searching for your topic would use. Avoid overly broad keywords ("economics," "regression") and overly narrow ones (your specific variable names). Good keywords balance specificity with searchability.

COMMON ABSTRACT MISTAKES

Mistake 1: No results. An abstract that says "We examine the effect of X on Y" without saying what you find is incomplete.

Mistake 2: Too many results. State the main finding and at most one important secondary finding.

Mistake 3: Jargon without context. The abstract should be accessible to any economist, not just specialists in your method.

Mistake 4: Citations in the abstract. Economics abstracts almost never cite other work. If you need to reference a method, name it rather than citing it.

Mistake 5: Starting with "In this paper, we…" Start with the world or the question, not with the paper itself.

Mistake 6: Wrong tense. Use present simple ("We find that X affects Y"), not past simple.

THE ABSTRACT--INTRODUCTION RELATIONSHIP

The abstract compresses the Introduction's three moves into ~140 words. The Introduction expands them into ~2,300 words. The two should tell the same story, but the abstract is not the Introduction's first paragraph copied and pasted. Key differences: the abstract omits the literature review, the roadmap, and the detailed identification strategy. What it keeps is the compressed argument: context → contribution → finding → implication.

A useful self-test: read only the abstract, then only the Introduction. Do they promise the same paper?

WHEN TO WRITE THE ABSTRACT

Write a draft abstract early: before you write the paper, if possible. This advice may seem counterintuitive: how can you summarise a paper you haven't written? But the draft abstract serves the same function as the draft conclusion (Unit 3) and the conceptualisation exercise (Unit 2); it forces you to articulate, in compressed form, what your paper does and why it matters. Like the one-paragraph Con-

clusion draft recommended in Unit 3, a draft abstract forces you to articulate your contribution in compressed form. If you cannot write 140 words summarising what you do and find, you may not yet have a clear enough sense of your paper's argument. Revise the abstract last, after the paper is complete.

REVISION CHECKLIST: ABSTRACT

* Is it within the journal's word limit (or 120-160 words if none specified)?

* Does it open with the world or your question, not with "In this paper"?

* Does it state what the paper does (method, data, model)?

* Does it preview at least one specific finding with direction and magnitude?

* Is it in present simple tense throughout?

* Is it free of citations, undefined acronyms, and equations?

* Does it match the Introduction --- same main finding, same framing?