The main objectives of scientific meetings include encouraging the exchange of experiences among participants. Making such experiences known to others is usually achieved through an “Abstract,” defined as an abstract from an original research, a clinical case report or a professional experience. An abstract is a piece of scientific writing that, even though it refers to a larger piece of writing, it should be absolutely independent and convey knowledge in an understandable manner.

The ability to communicate an idea in a few words (usually less than 300 words) to our colleagues is a skill that, as many other skills in our profession, can be acquired. In addition, such space limitation forces us to summarize our work and select only its best parts.¹

In the case of research, a generalized practice is to have “structured” abstracts, i.e., pre-established fixed sections.² Taking into account slight differences, structured abstracts include the following sections: Introduction, Methods, Results, and Conclusions.

The Introduction should include at least one phrase about the study rationale (why research should be carried out) and clearly state the research objective (research question). The Methods section should include the least number of elements necessary to establish the study adequacy, which encompasses design, population (main inclusion criteria), data collection methodology, primary outcome measures, main analysis methodology, and study location and time. The Results section should only refer to the main results, including selected basic descriptive considerations (population and frequency) and the primary outcome measure assessment. Secondary results may be included based on their relevance and available space. The Conclusions section should include the answer to the research question and, finally, some recommendations based on results obtained or regarding future research. It should be noted that the Abstract should not include information which is not described in the original article.³

There are other elements to be taken into account when writing an Abstract to be presented at a scientific meeting, for example, the article’s title, authors, participating institutions and iconography.

The title should be the same as that of the original manuscript; however, at many meetings, the title is included in the maximum allowed number of words/characters, making it necessary to abbreviate it but always bearing in mind the characteristics that make up a good title: brief, specific, representative and descriptive.

Including the authors in the Abstract will depend on the general authorship considerations.⁴ It should be noted that, as with the title, many meetings include authors in the maximum allowed number of words/characters, another relevant factor to be taken into account when deciding whether or not to include all authors in the Abstract. The same regard should be given to participating institutions, an item that easily helps us save words/characters.

Although sometimes it is possible to include tables or graphs in the Abstract, careful consideration should be given to their inclusion (and, if possible, it should always be disregarded). Including tables or graphs is usually difficult, they could easily get messed up when submitting the Abstract in electronic format, limit the number of words/characters to be included, and their interpretation is usually more complicated than what authors believe.

Lastly, acronyms and literature references should also be considered. The use of acronyms should be restricted and limited to particularly long (more than three words) and frequently repeated (more than three times) terms; obviously, acronyms should be explained in the Abstract the first time they are mentioned. Finally, there is no place for literature references in the Abstract. Potential conflicts of interest should also be taken into consideration and any funding received for research should be described.

Having analyzed all of the above considerations of what should or should not be included in an Abstract to be presented at a scientific meeting, we come to the practical point: how to write an Abstract. A resourceful method is to start looking at the complete article and remove those pieces that are not essential for comprehending the article. Starting with a 2000 word manuscript, it is easy to end up with a 500 word initial Abstract. Then, we should select the main contents and, finally, rearrange the grammar so as to achieve an understanding of the main idea with the fewest number of words. Let’s imagine we start from a block of marble...
that we want to carve into a sculpture: we would first give it an indefinite shape and then go over the details again and again until we achieve the expected outcome.

Although the main objective of an Abstract is, as herein described, to be presented at a scientific meeting as an introduction to an article, the same aspect should be taken into account for abstracts included in original articles submitted to scientific journals for possible publication or those included in a project seeking funding.5 Although Abstracts are accompanied by the complete manuscript and a wealth of information, in both cases they play a key role. An Abstract is definitely the first thing journal editors and peer reviewers read, as do the jury in an examination session, and therefore it will predispose them to continue reading the entire article. A well-written Abstract will create an interest in those responsible for reviewing an article.

Notwithstanding the considerations described in this manuscript, it is always important to review (and follow) the specific instructions established for each Abstract we write. In addition, we should also note that many scientific meetings require that the Abstract be written in English. It is very important to make a comprehensive review of our English writing so as to increase our chances of getting accepted and, also, of being correctly understood.6

Finally, in these times of brief communication due to the available technical resources that has resulted in the use of a hardly comprehensible jargon, it is essential to verify that our writing is understandable to all those we are willing to reach.

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REFERENCES
1. Pierson DJ. How to write an abstract that will be accepted for presentation at a national meeting. Respir Care 2004;49(10):1206-12.