What you need to know to ace a poster abstract

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When you aim to have your poster presentation showcased, submitting an abstract is the first step. In a way, it is your research’s first impression.

The deadline for abstract submissions for the AMA Research Challenge—the largest national, multispecialty research event for medical students, residents and fellows, and international medical graduates—is July 21. David M. Harris, MD, a member of the AMA Research Challenge Advisory Committee offers insight on the key steps to preparing and submitting an abstract.

Learn about the winning projects from the 2020 AMA Research Challenge.

Know the rules

For the AMA research challenge all abstracts must be submitted using an approved template, available on the Research Challenge website.

Abstracts must be submitted without pictures or graphs—save those for your actual posters—and should not exceed 350 words (roughly half a page typed in a document). Additional information that should be included but doesn’t fall within the word count includes the author’s name, co-author’s name, page numbering and any ancillary entrant information.

"As someone who has reviewed these [submissions] many times before, I can say that not following the format or rules is an easy way to get your abstract disqualified," said Dr. Harris, a radiation oncology resident at the University of Alabama-Birmingham.
Parts of an abstract

As far as actual content of an abstract goes, it can be broken down into four key components.

**Background:** This sets the table for your topic, including introducing the problem you aim to solve or the question you aim to answer through your research.

**Methods:** The methods is the "how" of your presentation. Explain how you went about gaining data or insight on the topic in a straight-forward manner. "It should be very dry and matter of fact [saying] this is what I did," Dr. Harris said. "You don't need much fluff."

**Results:** Highlight your key research findings in this section and do so without interpretation. "Some of you may have done really extensive research and it may not be possible to list all your results," Dr. Harris said. "In that case you want to highlight the key findings. You can go into more detail in your poster."

**Conclusion:** This is your summary and your theory on what your research indicates. This is also where researchers will point out limitations of their body of study and offer thoughts on the directions of future research.

Speaking generally, Dr. Harris offered a few additional tips. Among them: Make sure you proof-read your work and keep character count in mind throughout your abstract.

"Always stay concise in your abstract," Dr. Harris said. "You don't want to get too wordy. This is not like writing a poem or a novel."