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ANNUAL MEETING PREVIEW

Everything You Wanted to Know About Writing a Research Abstract but Were Too Afraid (or Started Too Late) to Ask

Ethan A. Halm, MD, MPH and Bruce E. Landon, MD, MBA, MSc

In this, the first in a series of four SGIM Forum articles highlighting the 2008 SGIM Annual Meeting in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Ethan A. Halm, MD, MPH, and Bruce E. Landon, MD, MBA, MSc, Co-Chairs of Scientific Abstracts, give advice on how to put together an outstanding abstract submission.

The scientific abstract program at the national meeting accounts for the largest number of submissions and presentations. Here we present some “Dos” and “Don’ts” for crafting an easily understandable, highly rated abstract.

Writing the Abstract: Dos

The abstract should have four sections: Background, Methods, Results, and Conclusions. The Methods and Results sections are the meat of the abstract and should take up two thirds of the space. Reviewers will only spend a few minutes going over each abstract. Make it easy for them to understand what you did, why you did it, what you found, and what it means. This shouldn’t be a mind-reading exercise. If you have done something very different or novel, call attention to it. You should also consider reviewing the structure and content of successful abstracts in your topic area from the past SGIM meeting. (See JGIM April 2007 supplement or <http://www.sgim.org/am07/handouts/JGIMSupplement2007.pdf>)

Title. Appropriately catchy is okay and can make your abstract memorable, but avoid being too nutty. The title should be related to the abstract and be descriptive. “Tabloid” titles usually backfire. For example, “Association Between Diuretic Use and Cardiovascular Mortality: a Nested Case-Control Study” is much better than “Dying to Pee: Diuretics Cause Sudden Cardiac Death.”

Background. In a few sentences, clearly

state the research question or study aims (“We examined the association between X and Y in persons with Z”) and briefly indicate why the question/topic is important.

Methods. Summarize key elements including the study design (randomized trial, prospective cohort, retrospective cohort, cross-sectional), study population/clinical setting, primary predictor and outcome variables, and the main statistical approach.

Results. Begin with a brief description of the study population, including the response rate (if applicable). Next, report the main finding with words and numbers that make it easy for the reader to understand the result. Don’t just list p-values. Words describing the relationship, followed by the numbers substantiating the statement, work best (e.g., “Subspecialists ordered twice as many tests as generalists (4.5 v. 2.8, p<0.05)”). Choose only the most important results. Multivariate analyses should follow univariate ones. Focus more on the final multivariate results (especially if different than the univariate ones) rather than reciting all univariate relationships. Avoid using all words and no numbers and vice versa. Mention if sensitivity (or alternate) analyses altered the principal finding if space allows.

Conclusions. In one or two sentences, indicate what your results mean for clinical care, education, policy, or future research. Avoid overstating your case or

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just repeating the main finding. Keep the conclusion focused on the implications of the results presented in the abstract.

Submitting the abstract. First, read and follow the submission instructions. Second, start and finish early. Third, pick both a primary and secondary category (if appropriate) to describe your abstract (described in detail on the SGIM website). This will help us steer your abstract to the appropriate review committee.

Writing the Abstract: Don'ts

Don't submit an abstract without someone else reviewing it first. No matter how smart, senior, or polished you are, your abstract will always be better after one or more cycles of pre-submission peer review. To paraphrase the author James Michener, "There are no good writers, only good re-writers."

Avoid "Last Minute Abstract Submission Stress Disorder." The abstract deadline is January 8, 2007, at midnight PST, but the online submission process opens right around Thanksgiving. Although it is human nature to wait until the last minute, save money (and stress) by submitting by December 21—the submission fee goes up on December 22. Plan sufficient time to write, proofread, and submit your abstract before the deadline. Remember, the closer to the deadline, the harder to get technical assistance and the slower the COS website will be.

Avoid CIATSSs (Contrived Idiosyncratic Abbreviations To Save Space). A few standard abbreviations are fine, assuming you spell them out the first time. However, people sometimes try to sneak under the character limit with "acronymagaly"—excessive use of acronyms. This may fool the computer counting characters, but it will make reading your abstract harder for human reviewers. Anything you can do to make your abstract "easy on the eyes," simple, and straightforward will be to your advantage.

Don't issue "promissory notes." Do not say "results will be forthcoming" or "discussed more fully in..."

Don't "slice the salami." Avoid splitting the main findings into multiple skinny abstracts short on substance if the results are better described in one abstract. Most times a "full sandwich" will be better satisfy the reviewers "hunger" and increase the chance of a highly rated abstract.

Additional Tips

Who should submit? Everyone. The national meeting should be a platform for our members' best work, regardless of seniority. While SGIM has a strong tradition in special sessions that feature the outstanding work of trainees and junior faculty, we encourage all SGIM members to submit their work including mid- and senior-level faculty.

Submit your abstract to your regional

SGIM meeting. Regional meetings are a great opportunity to disseminate your work and gain experience with oral and poster presentations, especially for trainees and junior faculty. You can submit and present the identical abstract at a regional and national SGIM meeting.

What about other national meetings? Can generalist researchers working in a particular specialty present their findings at SGIM and at a subspecialty society meeting? The answer is, "It depends, but probably yes." First carefully check the rules governing abstract submissions for both organizations. The SGIM eligibility policy states that an abstract not be submitted if it has already been published or accepted for publication either in article or abstract form prior to the abstract submission deadline.

Finally, the book *Publishing and Presenting Clinical Research* by SGIM member Warren S. Browner (2nd Edition, Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, 2006) is a great resource.

We look forward to your submissions. Thank you in advance to all of our Abstract Committee reviewer volunteers. For more information about the 2008 SGIM Annual Meeting, go to www.sgim.org/am08.

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To provide comments or feedback about Annual Meeting Preview, please contact Rachel Murkofsky at rmurk@hawaii.rr.com.

FROM THE REGIONS

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experiences: "I am excited about making this a successful experience. What do you feel has made your mentoring relationships successful in the past?" Be sure to share your own experiences as well. If you also function as an evaluator or supervisor, openly discuss this dual role to clarify expectations. Consider offering to remove yourself from the evaluator role, to ease the establishment of a candid mentoring relationship. With this shared knowledge and understanding, mutually generate an approach to communication and a commitment to work

together. Finally, leave open the possibility to revisit your communication and working styles in the future.

Moving Forward

With this three-domain approach, we hope mentors will feel more comfortable in helping empower students to initiate relationships and actively fine-tune them to achieve their goals. For a further discussion of the mentee's perspective, we recommend a recent publication (Lee et al. Nature's Guide for Mentors. *Nature* 2007; 447:791-7.) Regardless of the approach,

evolution of the relationship should be symbiotic, with each party contributing to the dialogue and both receiving satisfaction out of the growth. A famous author once said, "Mentors and [mentees] are partners in an ancient human dance, and one of [mentoring's] great rewards is the daily chance it gives [everyone] to get back on the dance floor."

SGIM

Please send any comments, suggestions, or ideas for From the Regions to Keith vom Eigen at vomeigen@adp.uchc.edu