

Structured Abstracts in Nursing Journals: A Gradual Shift and Disciplinary Differences

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Summary

Historical Adoption of Structured Abstracts in Nursing Journals

A comprehensive bibliometric analysis examining the evolution of structured abstracts from 1950 to 2024, with implications for English for Academic Purposes (EAP) instruction

Research Scope

Analysis of over 6,600 articles from nine journals spanning nursing, medicine, nutrition, psychology, and aging studies

Time Frame

Longitudinal study covering 74 years of academic publishing from 1950 to 2024

EAP Focus

Pedagogical implications for academic writing instruction and genre awareness development

Background

Abstracts help readers quickly grasp the core content and significance of the study

Structured Abstracts (SA)

Segmented organization with labeled sections including Background, Objectives, Methods, Results, and Conclusion. Facilitates rapid comprehension and supports information retrieval in digital databases.

Advantages:
Enhanced information retrieval, improved reader comprehension, supports academic transparency, enables systematic reviews

Unstructured Abstracts (UA)

Single paragraph format without explicit segmentation. Offers flexibility and narrative flow, often preferred in humanities and social sciences for contextual depth.

Characteristics:
Flexible format, narrative structure, preferred in qualitative research, maintains storytelling elements

Research Framework

Research Questions

- Q1 How has the adoption rate of structured abstracts evolved in nursing and related journals over time?
- Q2 What patterns emerge across disciplines and journal types?
- Q3 What factors contribute to variations in SA adoption?
- Q4 What are the implications for academic writing instruction in language education?

Methodology Overview

This study employed a comprehensive bibliometric analysis approach, combining quantitative data analysis with qualitative insights to understand the evolution of abstract formatting practices across disciplines.

Methods

Data Source:

- Scopus database

Journal Selection:

- Nursing journals with 35+ years of publication
- Top 10% by citation rate (9 journals)
- 8 experimental, 1 review journal

Article Selection:

- Issue 1 of each year
- "Original" or "Research" articles
- Total: 6,604 articles (1950–2024)

Analysis:

- Measured SA adoption rate
- Calculated overall and journal-specific averages
- Editorial influence assessment (ICMJE affiliation)

Major Findings

Three Phases of SA Adoption

Initial Emergence (1990s)

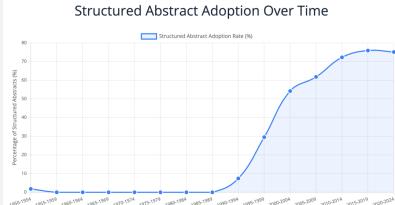
Structured abstracts began appearing sporadically in select journals, often in response to editorial policy changes or alignment with international guidelines. Adoption was limited but growing, marking the first shift from traditional unstructured formats.

Rapid Expansion (2000s)

Significant increase in SA usage occurred, with many journals transitioning to structured formats for the majority of their research articles. This period coincided with broader shifts in academic publishing, including the rise of digital indexing and evidence-based reporting standards.

Stabilization (2010s onward)

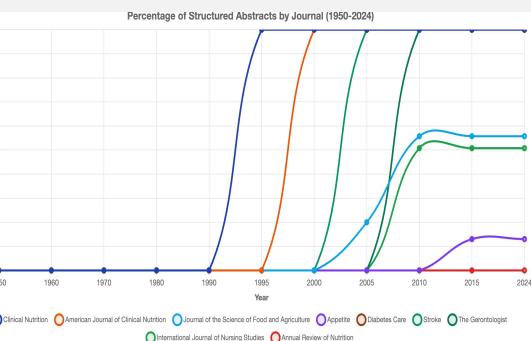
SA formats became the norm in most journals, with adoption rates plateauing at high levels. Journals that had not yet adopted SA formats tended to be those in interdisciplinary or qualitative fields, where flexibility and narrative structure were prioritized.



- Clinical Medicine Journals
- Nutrition & Epidemiology
- Evidence-Based Practice Fields

Early & Consistent Adopters

These disciplines emphasized methodological rigor and reproducibility, making structured abstracts a natural fit for their research communication needs.



Psychology Journals

Social Sciences

Interdisciplinary Studies

Variable Adopters

These fields showed more variability, reflecting diverse research methods and epistemological orientations that value narrative flow and contextual depth.

Discussion

Foundational Influences

- International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE)
- High-Impact Medical Journals
- IMRAD Structure Alignment
- SA adoption in nursing progressed gradually
- SA applied beyond clinical studies to diverse nursing research
- Early adoption in clinical/nutritional journals influenced by ICMJE registration
- UA common in qualitative and observational research due to flexibility

Historical Adoption of SA

- 1987: SA headings introduced in medical literature.
- 1988: BMJ mandated SA format for clinical trials.
- 1993: ICMJE recommended SA usage in biomedical journals.

SA in Medical Journals

- Major journals (BMJ, JAMA, The Lancet) standardized SA in the 1990s.
- SA improves clarity and decision-making in clinical practice.
- Higher adoption in medicine compared to other disciplines. (APA, 2019)

Nursing Science Context

- Nursing emphasizes evidence-based practice and interdisciplinary collaboration.
- SA is increasingly recognized in nursing-related fields.
- Lack of comprehensive data on SA adoption and editorial guidelines in nursing journals.

Selected References

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