How to write a conference abstract

What is an abstract?
Abstracts are short pieces of academic writing that provides an overview of your research, either partially or in full. An abstract is a very brief (often between 200-300 words in length) overview of your research. It tells the reader WHAT you did, WHY you did it, HOW you did it, WHAT you found, and WHAT it means.

The majority of abstracts are informative. While they still do not critique or evaluate a work, they do more than describe it. A good informative abstract acts as a surrogate for the work itself. That is, the writer presents and explains all the main arguments and the important results and evidence in the complete article/paper/book. An informative abstract includes the information that can be found in a descriptive abstract (purpose, methods, scope) but also includes the results and conclusions of the research and the recommendations of the author.

What is a conference abstract?
A conference abstract is an abstract that you submit for consideration to present a paper at a professional conference. It is usually much longer than a summary abstract and functions independently from the paper it is based on (since the conference review committee will see it and not your actual paper). Its length will be specified by the conference organizer but will rarely be more than 500 words (just short of two double-spaced pages).

Your primary audience for the conference abstract is the conference review committee. The conference participants -- to whom you will actually deliver your paper -- are your secondary audience. In addition to impressing the conference reviewing committee, your purpose in writing a conference abstract is to create a "research space" from which to write/present and to appeal to as large an audience as possible. Because the conference review committee will usually read the abstract and not your actual paper, you need to think of it as an independent document, aimed at that specific committee and connecting solidly with the theme of the conference (you may want to pick up phrasing from the conference title or call for papers in the abstract to reinforce this connection).

In an ideal world, it is written after the actual paper is completed, but in some cases you’ll write an abstract for a paper you haven’t yet written—especially if the conference is some time away. Examine the call for papers carefully; it will specify the length of the abstract, special formatting requirements, whether the abstract will be published in the conference bulletin or proceedings, etc. Abstracts that do not meet the specified format are usually rejected early in the proceedings, so pay attention to each conference’s rules!
Conference abstracts must be pared down to the essentials. Typically, they seek to answer key questions:

- Why did you choose this study or project?
- What did/will you do and how?
- What did you/do you hope to find?
- What do your findings mean?

The title should be informative and focused, indicating the problem and your general approach. It’s very fashionable in the humanities to have titles featuring “post-colonic surge”—a catchy phrase, a colon, and then an explanation of the title. While snappy titles may help your abstract be noticed, it’s really what comes after the colon that sells the abstract, so pay attention to it. “All the World’s a Ship: Race and Ethnicity in Moby Dick” catches the eye, but “Melville’s Deconstruction of Ethnicity in the ‘Midnight, Forecastle’ Episode of Moby Dick” tells readers much more specifically what you’re promising to deliver.

Don’t repeat or rephrase your title in the body of the abstract; usually it’s already provided in the heading. Summarize your thesis and conclusions in the abstract, as well as your goals, approach and main findings. Keep bibliographic references to a minimum and embed the information in text; short abstracts don’t have Works Cited pages or footnotes.

The abstract should clearly demonstrate how your research links to the theme of the conference. It should also state the purpose of the research (introduction), how the problem was studied (methods), the principal findings (results), and what the findings mean (discussion and conclusion). It is important to be descriptive but concise—say only what is essential, using no more words than necessary to convey meaning.

The abstract should begin with a clear sense of the research question you have framed (and, if the work is completed, with your thesis). Often this is set up as a problem/solution strategy: “Although some recent scholars claim to have identified Shakespeare’s lost play Cædennio, that attribution is still not accepted. In this paper I use the records of the Worshipful Company of Stationers, London’s chief publishing organization, to show that the play identified by Charles Hamilton in 1990 is not actually the play Shakespeare’s company mounted in 1613.”

It always helps when you identify the theoretical or methodological school that you are using to approach your question or position yourself within an ongoing debate. This helps readers situate your ideas in the larger conversations of your discipline. For instance, “The debate among Folsom, McGann, and Stallybrass over the notion of database as a genre (PMLA 122.5, Fall 2007) suggests that…” or “Using the definition of dataclouds proposed by Johnson-Eilola (2005), I will argue that…”
Finally, briefly state your conclusion. “Through analyzing Dickinson’s use of metaphor, I demonstrate that she systematically transformed Watt’s hymnal tropes as a way of asserting her own doctrinal truths. This transformation…”

There’s an ongoing debate about how much jargon should be included in an abstract. My best advice is to add any technical terms you need, but don’t put in jargon for jargon’s sake or just to make it look like you are an expert (this especially extends to (post)modernizing your words or other typographical excrescences).

A conference paper abstract should also include a few sentences about how the proposed paper fits in the theme of the conference. For instance, a call for papers for a session on “Science and Literature in the 19th Century” at a conference entitled “(Dis)Junctions” requested “critical works on the interaction between scientific writing and literature in the 19th century. How did scientific discoveries, theories and assumptions (for example, in medicine and psychology, but not limited to these) influence contemporaneous fiction?” If you were submitting a paper to this session, you would want to have a sentence or two about the theories you were discussing and name the particular works where you would identify their influence. If you can work the words “join” or “junction” (or “disjunction”) into your title or abstract, you’ll increase your chance of having the paper accepted, since you’re showing clearly how the paper fits the theme of the session.

It’s also considered good in a conference abstract to conclude with a sentence about your presentation, since the great horror of session chairs is the paper that runs far too long (or embarrassingly too short). Organizers also need to know if you need any special technology to present the paper. So a concluding sentence such as “This paper can be presented in 20 minutes and requires the technology to show brief film clips on DVD” is a much-appreciated professional touch.

The Writing Style
Most abstracts are written within one paragraph and the style should incorporate the Four C’s of abstract writing. According to UC Regents (2006) The Four C’s include the following:

• Complete - it covers the major parts of your research.
• Concise – it contains no excess wordiness or unnecessary information.
• Clear – it is readable, well organised and not too jargon –laden.
• Cohesive – it flows smoothly between the parts
An Example: Philip K. Dick and Philosophy

The Call for Papers (CFP):

Call for Abstracts
Philip K. Dick and Philosophy
Open Court Popular Culture and Philosophy Series
There are few authors as popular as Philip K. Dick who offer anything even approaching the amount and quality of philosophical content that his works contain. His novels and short stories not only reference, but primarily concern central philosophical issues, and his career as a whole took place at that point where existential dread meets epistemology and metaphysics. Dick wrote of his work that “I am a fictionalizing philosopher, not a novelist . . . the core of my writing is not art but truth.” For this volume we seek proposals that will present and analyze Dick’s philosophical work in the spirit in which he approached his writing: serious, careful, entertaining, and funny.

We plan the release of the volume in Fall 2011, as soon as possible after the release of The Adjustment Bureau. This means the entire book is planned on a reduced schedule, and we will be seeking some authors to volunteer to rewrite immediately after the movie debut, March 4, in order to incorporate The Adjustment Bureau into their chapters. These will likely be chapters dealing with issues of free will and choice.

Chapters may concern any of Dick’s novels or stories, or movies based upon them, although ideally we would prefer that there be some upfront mention and discussion of one of his most famous movies—Blade Runner, Total Recall, Minority Report, A Scanner Darkly, or The Adjustment Bureau. In addition to addressing the movies, we would be especially interested in chapters also dealing with Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?; Ubik; Flow My Tears, The Policeman Said; A Scanner Darkly; Radio Free Albemuth; VALIS; “King of the Elves,” “Adjustment Team,” and “We Can Remember It for You Wholesale.”

Chapters should be interesting and engaging to readers who have only seen the movies, while still providing insightful discussion and elaboration for readers who have read his texts.
We welcome submissions from any philosophical tradition. Any number of topics would work very well. Here are a few ideas:

• What is a ‘free will’?
• Is there ‘Elbow Room’ in The Adjustment Bureau and Minority Report?
• William James and David Norris’s Pragmatic Solution to the Problem of Free Will
• Amor Fati, or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Determinism
• Mortality and the “burned so very, very brightly” theodicy in Blade Runner
• Foreknowledge, Divine and Otherwise, in The Adjustment Bureau and Minority Report
• The Will to Believe . . . a pink beam of light?
• Epistemic responsibility, Gettier problems, and the pink beam
• How can I tell reality from Rekall?
• Does a Replicant have an essence?
• The Replicant’s Sickness Unto Death
• Means-ends rationality in A Scanner Darkly
• Personal identity in A Scanner Darkly
• Moral character, habits, and memory in A Scanner Darkly
• Memory and the self; Hume, Locke and Total Recall
• Is a Replicant a person?
• “All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in the rain:” Roy Batty’s capacity for qualia
• The Man in the High Castle: On the Uses and Abuses of Alternate History for Life

Please send a 200-300 word abstract to pkdandphilosophy@gmail.com prior to September 9th. Keep in mind that you’ll have to commit to working on a tight schedule. Finished chapters, approx. 4000 words, will be required by November 18th, with a rewrite due Jan 31st, 2011.
Here’s an abstract submitted to this CFP:

Deckard’s Missing Dick: The Hero from *Blade Runner* to *A Scanner Darkly*

Abstract submitted to *Philip K. Dick and Philosophy*

This essay focuses on the transformation of central characters in the science fiction of Philip K. Dick as his texts make their way from page to screen, arguing that too often those characters are transformed from nebbish, mid-level bureaucrats and functionaries subject to the indignities of living in a postmodern technological environment to Hollywood blockbuster characters in control of their destiny and their technological environment. This is especially apparent in Ridley Scott’s influential film *Blade Runner*. As film critic David Edelstein perceptively notes, “The bleary gumshoe hero of the film has little connection to the book's unhappily married drudge, who mechanically executes ‘replicants’ as a means to afford animals for display in his front yard.” This transformation in Dick’s characters has been effected again and again. Douglas Quail, the miserable little salaried employee of “We Can Remember It For You Wholesale,” becomes Arnold Schwarzenegger. John Anderton, described as “bald and fat and old” in the short story “Minority Report,” becomes Tom Cruise. It’s clear that Hollywood has little use for Dick’s characters. Indeed, one might say these characters—and their responsible film directors—are missing Dick. They are missing Dick’s most important philosophical insights regarding living in a postmodern technological age. This has largely been true until Bob Arctor moved from page to screen in Richard Linklater’s imaginative take on Dick’s *A Scanner Darkly*. Bob Arctor actually stands in an interesting relationship to Rick Deckard, one perhaps mirrored in the relationship of Linklater to Scott as directors practicing their technical craft and forging a relationship with the literary texts that inspire their films. I argue that Bob Arctor and *A Scanner Darkly* serve as an argument against Scott’s transformation of Deckard and other mis-appropriations of the “hero” in Dick’s oeuvre and offers a more authentic Dickean take on our technological age.