

## The Importance of Writing an Appropriate Abstract for Postgraduate EFL Libyan Students

Dr. Ali Ahmed Elmojahed

Associate Professor  
School of Languages, The Libyan Academy  
Department of English

### المستخلص

أظهر فحص دقيق لعدد من الرسائل التي كتبها بعض طلاب الدراسات العليا الليبيين في اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية أن لديهم مشاكل في كتابة المستخلصات. تكمن المشكلة في حقيقة أن الطلاب يدرجون معلومات غير ضرورية أو يستبعدون بعض المعلومات الأساسية في ملخصاتهم.

تهدف هذه الورقة إلى تسليط الضوء على أهمية كتابة مستخلص مناسب لطلاب الدراسات العليا في اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في ليبيا. تم جمع بيانات هذا البحث من بعض الأمثلة على مستخلصات غير ملائمة كتبها بعض طلاب الدراسات العليا الليبيين الدارسين للغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في الجامعات الليبية وأيضاً من استبيانات تم توزيعها على بعض المحاضرين في أقسام اللغة الإنجليزية بالدراسات العليا في الأكاديمية الليبية وجامعات: طرابلس - الزاوية - صبراتة وبنغازي. وكانت البيانات التي تم جمعها متسقة مع الفرضية.

وأظهرت نتائج هذه الورقة أن الطلاب لديهم بعض المشاكل في كتابة المستخلصات لرسائل الماجستير، فأحيانا تستبعد بعض المعلومات الأساسية من المستخلصات، وأحيانا تضمن معلومات مطولة، أو تفاصيل غير ضرورية. ساهم هذا البحث في تسليط الضوء على مجال مهم من مجالات كتابة الأوراق البحثية. وأشارت النتائج إلى أنه ينبغي إيلاء مزيد من الاهتمام لكتابة هذا الجزء الهام (المستخلص) من الأوراق البحثية.

### Abstract

A careful examination of a number of dissertations written by some Libyan EFL postgraduate students, has shown that they have problems in writing abstracts. The problem lies in the fact that students include unnecessary information or exclude some essential information in their abstracts. The aim of the current paper is to shed light on the importance of writing an appropriate abstract for postgraduate EFL Libyan students. The data for this research was collected from some examples of inappropriate abstracts written by some EFL Libyan postgraduate students and from questionnaires distributed among some lecturers in postgraduate English Departments at the Libyan Academy, Tripoli University, Zawia University, Sabrata University, and Benghazi University. The collected data was consistent with the hypothesis. The results of the present paper showed that students have some problems in writing dissertation abstracts. On one hand, they exclude some essential information from their abstracts and on the other hand, they include lengthy background information, or unnecessary details.

This investigation contributed in highlighting an important area of writing research papers. The findings indicated that more attention should be paid to writing this important part of research papers-

**Keywords:** Abstract - Dissertation – postgraduate

## Introduction

There are many requirements for writing a research paper. The most essential condition is to be written in an academic style. Writing in an academic style is not restricted to consider formality, objectivity and conciseness, but also organization and coherence.

An abstract is one of the important parts of any research paper. However, a careful examination of a number of the dissertations, written by some of the postgraduate students, shows that they have problems in writing abstracts. Some examples of abstracts lack the essential elements of writing an abstract. Students sometimes include unnecessary information or exclude some essential information.

The current paper is an attempt to shed light on the importance of writing an appropriate abstract for postgraduate EFL Libyan students. The paper defines, explains, and provides a guideline for post-graduate students about writing an appropriate and effective abstract. It also analyzes some examples of inaccurately written abstracts and provides valuable information based on the questionnaire responses, which was filled by 16 lecturers from higher EFL Libyan Universities.

### 1- What is an abstract?

As Kahn, 1994. p. 321, indicates, “An abstract, or synopsis, usually takes the form of a single, tightly placed paragraph ... The reader should be able to tell from a glance at it, what the outcome of the research was.” In fact, the abstract acts as a surrogate or synopsis of the research paper, doing almost as much work as the thousands of words that follows it in the body.

The abstract must cover all parts of the study in order to fully explain the paper and research.

### 2- The importance/ need of writing an abstract

An abstract is a brief summary of a research work. It always appears at the beginning of a research paper, however, it is written at the end of the research because it will summarize the contents of the entire work.

According to Kahn, 1994, “One of the most important places for a full summary is the very beginning of the document – an ‘executive summary’ or ‘abstract’.” Abstracts, as Bell, 1999, states, “are invaluable and can save weeks of effort” p.46. According to McCombes, 2019, an abstract will almost always have to be included “when writing a thesis, dissertation, research paper, or submitting an article to an academic journal.”

Abstracts have always played a crucial role in explaining studies quickly and succinctly to journal editors and researchers and prompting them to read further. However, with the ubiquity of online publication databases, writing a compelling abstract is even more important today than it was in the days of bound paper manuscripts.

The abstract is often the only opportunity for a writer to convince readers to keep reading. It is important to spend time and energy crafting an abstract that both faithfully represents the central parts of the study, as well as captivates the audience. Abstracts also help readers understand the researcher's main argument promptly.

The main purpose of the abstract is to lead researchers to the published work. Abstracts let readers decide whether the research discussed is relevant to their own interests or study. Abstracts also help readers understand the main argument quickly.

Abstracts are usually required for submission of articles to journals, applications for research grants, completions and submission of theses, and for submission of proposals for conference papers. Moreover, many online databases use abstracts to index larger works. Therefore, abstracts should contain keywords that allow for easy searching.

### 3- The essential parts of an abstract

#### 1. Statement of the Problem/Background

- ✓ A brief explanation/statement about the background of the problem should be made.
- ✓ The problem that the work attempts to solve should be stated clearly.
- ✓ The scope of the research should be specified clearly.
- ✓ The argument, thesis, or claim of the research should be indicated clearly.

#### 2. Objectives

- ✓ The Objectives of the work should be stated clearly.

#### 3. Research

#### Question/Hypothesis

Hypothesis and a rationale for the research should be stated clearly. Or, what is your scientific question? And why is it important? These questions should be answered briefly.

#### 4. Description of the research method/s and design Used in the Investigation

Methods used to solve the problem should be stated. How was your data collected? How big was the sample size? Describe the participants. What were the main outcome measurements? This will probably be the longest part of your abstract.

#### 5. The major findings/ Results/Summary of the Investigation

The paper's major findings should be stated concisely and comprehensively in an easily understood manner. Was the data consistent with your hypothesis? If not, how did it differ? Describe the results.

#### 6. The conclusion reached/ Interpretation of the Investigation

The conclusion reached should be stated concisely and clearly.

#### 7. Implications of the results to the world of scientific inquiry

How the work adds to the body of knowledge on the topic should be presented. Any practical or theoretical applications from the findings or implications for future research should be provided.

#### 4- Types of abstracts

All abstracts are written with the same essential objective: to give a summary of your study. However, there are two basic styles of abstract: descriptive and informative. Here is a brief delineation of the two:

- **Descriptive abstract**: 100-200 words in length; indicates the type of information found in the paper; explains the purpose, objective, and methods of the paper but omits the results and conclusion
- **Informative abstracts**: one paragraph to one page in length; a truncated version of your paper that summarizes every aspect of the study, including the results; acts as a “surrogate” for the research itself, standing in for the larger paper

Of the two types, informative abstracts are much more common, and they are widely used for submission to journals and conferences. Informative abstracts apply to lengthier and more technical research, while descriptive abstracts are more suitable for shorter papers and articles. The best method of determining which abstract type you need to use is to follow the instructions for journal submissions and to read as many other published articles in those journals as possible.

#### 5- What should NOT be included in an abstract

- Since the abstract must be accomplished in the space of only a few hundred words, it is important not to include ambiguous references or phrases that will confuse the readers or mislead them about the content and objectives of the research.
- Moreover, acronyms or abbreviations should be avoided since these will need to be explained in order to make sense to the reader.
- Only references to people or other words should be used if they are well-known. Otherwise, generally referencing anything outside of the study should be avoided in the abstract.
- Tables, figures, sources, or long quotations should never be included in the abstract.
- Furthermore, lengthy background information, new information that is not present in the paper, and unnecessary details about the methods used also should not be included in the abstract.
- Future tense should not be used because the abstract is an overview of already researched work
- As abstract has limited words, the definition of the key terms is not essential.

#### 6- Referencing Systems

It is important to know that there are several different referencing systems, with variations within each. In fact, there are many citation/reference systems, such as, Harvard System, APA (American Psychological Association) Style, MLA (Modern Language

Association) system, GB 7714, GOST - Name Sort, GOST - Title Sort, ISO 690 - First Element and Date, ISO 690 - First Numerical Reference, SIST02, and Turabian. Whichever system you choose, it is important to follow a format that is clear and consistent, i.e. do not mix the systems.

There are few differences among these referencing systems regarding writing abstracts. However, there are more similarities among these referencing systems concerning writing abstracts than differences. Most of the referencing systems agree about including the same essential parts in an abstract with little differences in terms, layout, formatting, number of words, placement or tense use.

For example, the APA style recommends using the active voice and past tense in the abstract, but the present tense may be used to describe conclusions and implications. Acronyms or abbreviated words should be defined in the abstract. As in APA style manual, most of the MLA abstracts range between 150 – 250 words, whereas in Harvard Style the abstract must be no more than 400 words. As per AMA style guidelines, (American Medical Association Manual of Style) the abstract length is restricted to 175 words. The abstract in AMA style should give key components of the complete research.

## **7- Data Collection, presentation and analysis**

The data for this research was collected from some examples of inappropriate abstracts written by some EFL Libyan postgraduate students and from questionnaires distributed among some lecturers in postgraduate English Departments at the Libyan Academy and some other Libyan Universities. The following section presents the analysis of the examples of inappropriate abstracts and the questionnaire responses.

### **7.1 Analysis of some inappropriate examples of students abstracts**

#### **Example A (See Appendix 2)**

After a careful examination of abstract (A) it has been noted that, regardless of grammatical errors, the abstract does not follow the proper structure of writing an abstract. It modestly started with the aim the study followed by the implications. Moreover, the rest of the script is merely a description of the structure of the dissertation. In fact, it is just a list of the chapters included in the dissertation.

It lacks the main essential parts of an abstract as Statement of the Problem, the Research Question and the Hypothesis. Although, it did mention the instruments used (a questionnaire and interviews), it did not answer the following questions: How was the data collected? How big was the sample size? Who were the participants? Furthermore, it did not state the paper's major findings concisely and comprehensively. Therefore, it does not represent the central parts of the study, nor captivates the audience.

#### **Example B (See Appendix 3)**

After a careful examination of abstract (B) it has been noted that the abstract does not follow the proper structure of writing an abstract. It immediately initiated with the objective of the study followed by the (structure) of the dissertation as a whole, listing the chapters and providing what each chapter contained. It merely mentioned that the results

and the conclusion are in chapter four and five without stating the major findings concisely and comprehensively in an easily understood manner. It has also included unnecessarily repeated statements which made the abstract longer than it should be. Therefore, it does not represent the central parts of the study, nor captivates the audience.

## 7.2 Presentation and Analysis of the lecturers' questionnaire

### Analysis of question 1

As a response to question 1 which asks to what extent students do not provide a brief background in the abstract, 14 lectures (87.5 %) went to always, whereas 2 (12.5) chose sometimes. This result indicates that the majority of the respondents believe that students do not provide a brief background in their abstracts.

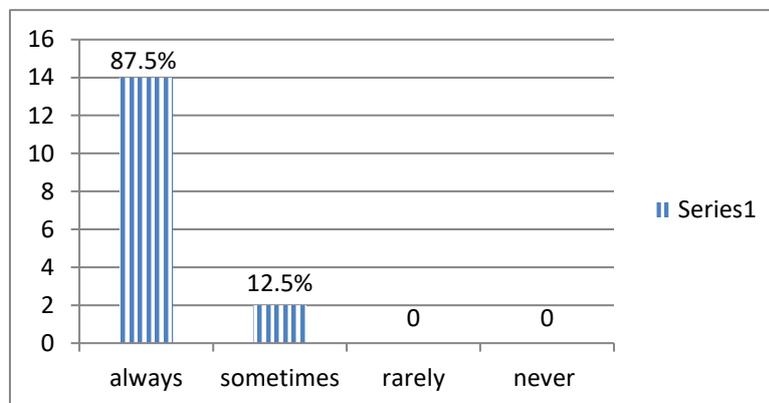


Figure 2 Results of Question 1

### Analysis of question 2

As a reply to question 2 which asks if the problem that the work attempts to solve is not stated clearly, 2 lectures (12.5%) went to always, 10 (62.5%) chose sometimes, and 2 (12.5%) went to rarely. Once more, this result indicates that the majority of the respondents believe that students do not state clearly the problem that the work attempts to solve in their abstracts.

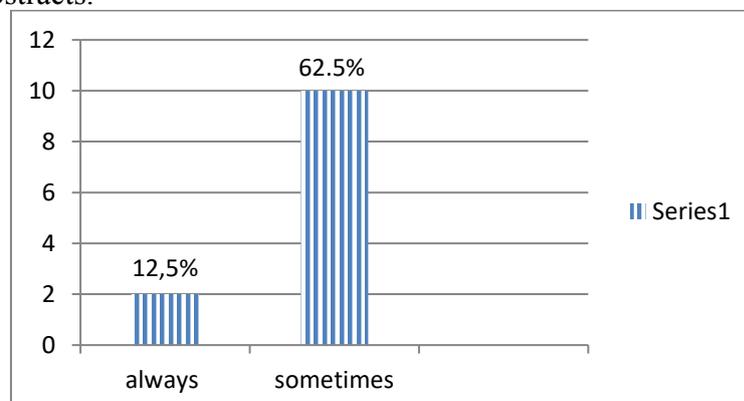


Figure 3 Results of Question 2

### Analysis of question 3

As a reaction to question 3 which asks if the scope of the research is not specified clearly, 6 lectures (37.5%) went to always, 8 (50%) chose sometimes, and 2 (12.5%) went to rarely. This result indicates that most of the respondents believe that students do not specify clearly the scope of the research in their abstracts.

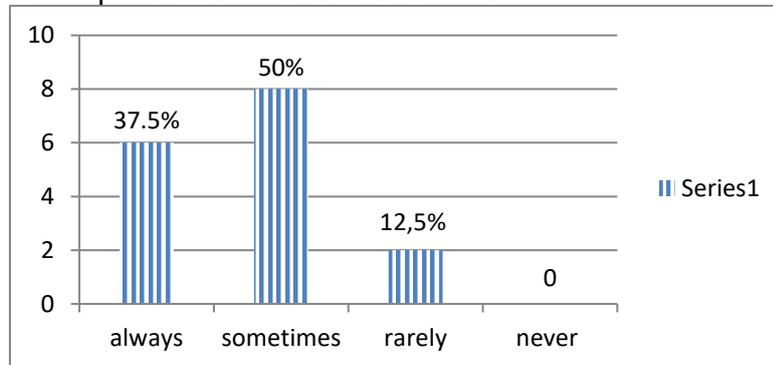


Figure 4 Results of Question 3

### Analysis of question 4

As a reply to question 4 which asks if the argument, thesis, or claim of the research is not indicated clearly, 6 lectures (37.5%) went to always, 8 (50%) chose sometimes and 2 (12.5%) went to rarely. This result also indicates that most of the respondents believe that students do not indicate clearly the argument, thesis, or claim of the research in their abstracts.

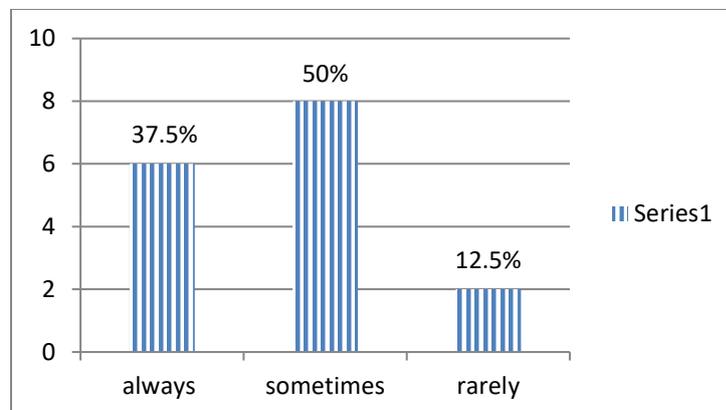


Figure 5 Results of Question 4

### Analysis of question 5

As a response to question 5 which asks if the abstract is written in a poor language, 14 lectures (87.5 %) chose always, whereas 2 (12.5) went to rarely. This result reveals that the majority of the respondents believe that students always write their abstracts in a poor language.

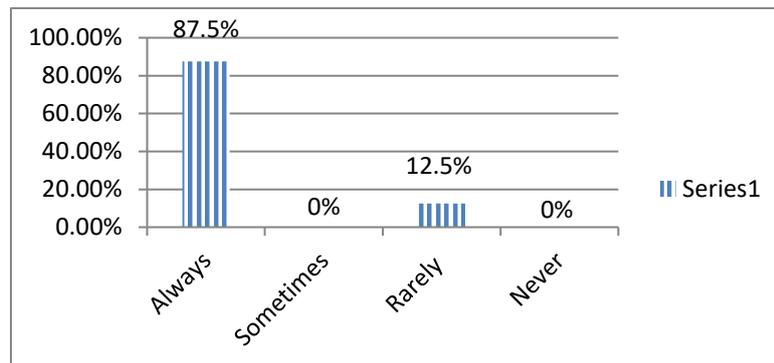


Figure 6 Results of Question 5

### Analysis of question 6

As a reaction to question 6 which asks if the abstract contains spelling mistakes, 2 lectures (12.5%) went to always, 6 lectures (37.5%) chose sometimes, and 8 (50%) went to rarely. The responses to this question varied from always to sometimes to rarely, yet all of the responses indicate that students' abstracts contain spelling mistakes to some degree.

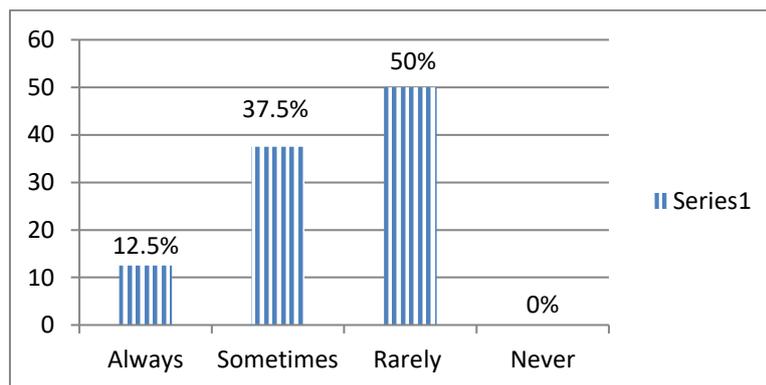


Figure 7 Results of Question 6

### Analysis of question 7

As a reply to question 7 which asks if the abstract contains grammatical errors, 2 lectures (12.5%) went to always, 10 (62.5%) chose sometimes, and 4 (25%) went to rarely. The responses to this question varied from always to sometimes to rarely, yet all of the responses indicate that students' abstracts contain grammatical mistakes to some degree.

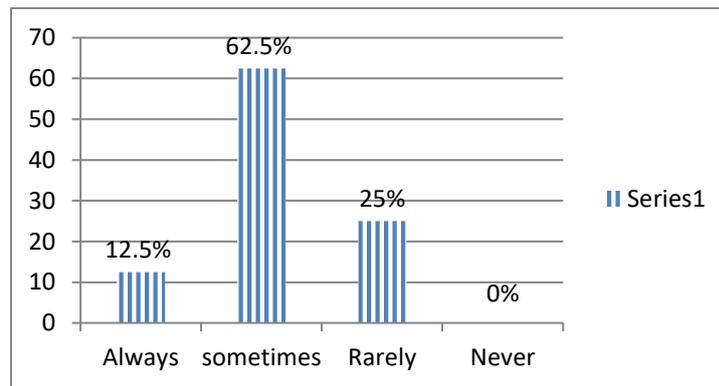


Figure 8 Results of Question 7

### Analysis of question 8

Regarding question 8, which inquires about whether the abstract is written in the first person, 4 lectures (25%) went to sometimes, 10 (62.5%) selected rarely whereas 2 lectures (12.5%) went to never. The responses to this question varied from sometimes to rarely, to never, yet the highest ratio was 'rarely' which indicates that students write in the first person in few instances.

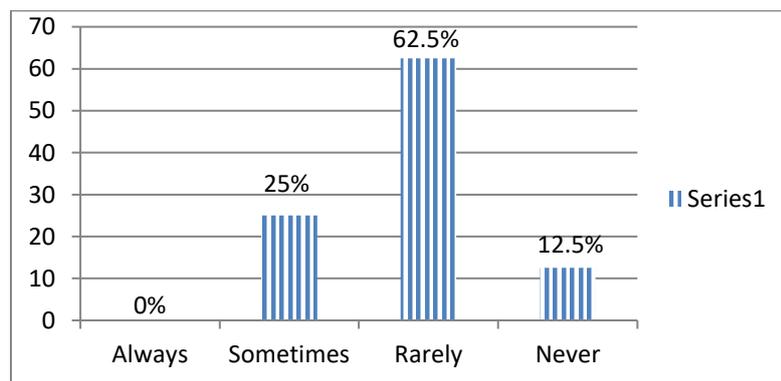


Figure 9 Results of Question 8

### Analysis of question 9

Concerning question 9, item (A), which inquires about whether the abstract is too long because it includes lengthy background information, 12 lectures (75%) went to sometimes, and 4 (25%) chose rarely. The result of this question reveals that the majority of the respondents believe that sometimes the abstract is too long because it includes lengthy background information.

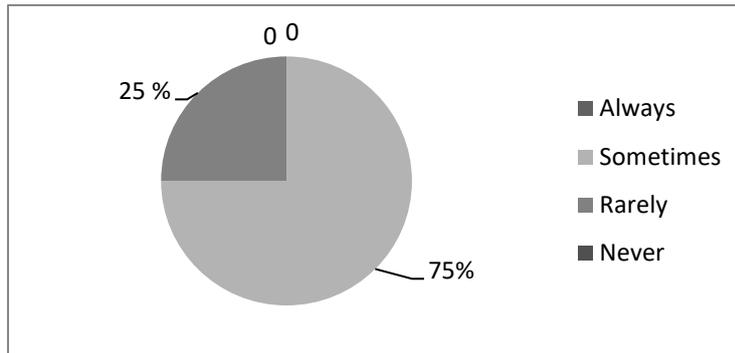


Figure 10 Results of Question 9 (A)

In relation to question 9, item (B), which inquires about whether the abstract is too long because it includes new information that is not present in the paper, 8 lectures (50%) went to sometimes, 4 (25%) chose rarely, and 4 (25%) chose never. The result of this question indicates that half of the respondents believe that sometimes the abstract is too long because it includes new information that is not present in the paper.

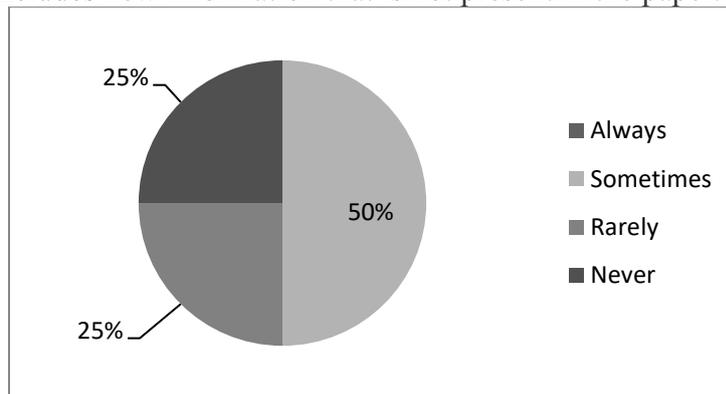


Figure 11 Results of Question 9 (B)

With regard to question 9, item (c), which inquires about whether the abstract is too long because it includes unnecessary details about the methods used, 2 lectures (12.5%) went to always, 10 (62.5%) selected sometimes whereas 2 lectures (12.5%) chose rarely, and 2 lectures (12.5%) chose never. The responses to this question varied from always to sometimes to rarely, to never, yet the highest ratio was 'sometimes' which indicates that sometimes students' abstracts are too long because they include unnecessary details about the methods used.

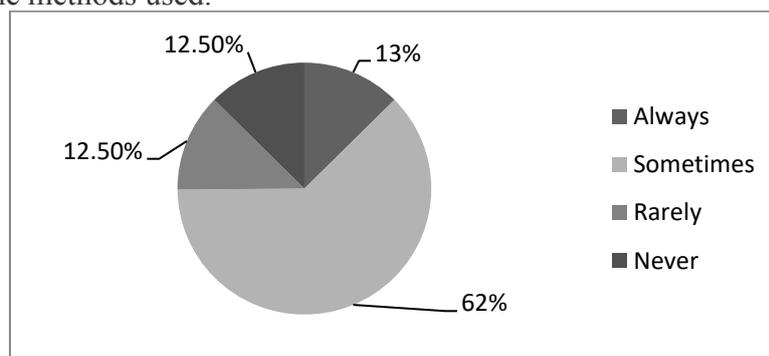


Figure 12 Results of Question 9 (C)

### Analysis of question 10

Concerning question 10, item (A), which asks if the abstract includes Tables, 2 lectures (12.5%) went to sometimes, whereas 14 lectures (87.5 %) went to never. This result indicates clearly that the majority of the respondents have never seen tables in the students' abstracts.

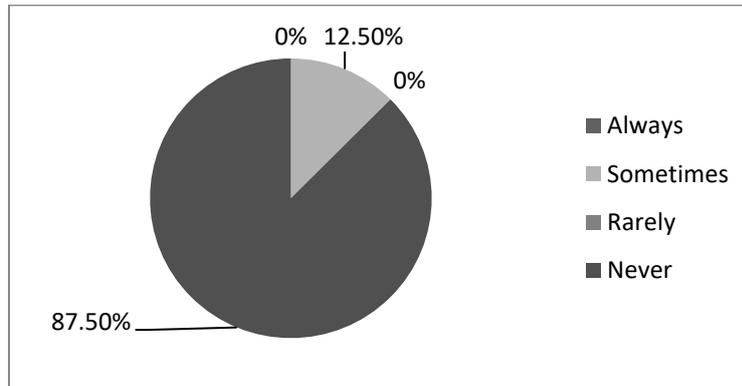


Figure 13 Results of Question 10 (A)

Regarding question 10, item (B), which asks if the abstract includes Figures, 2 lectures (12.5%) went to rarely, whereas 14 lectures (87.5 %) went to never. This result also shows clearly that the majority of the respondents have never seen figures in the students' abstracts.

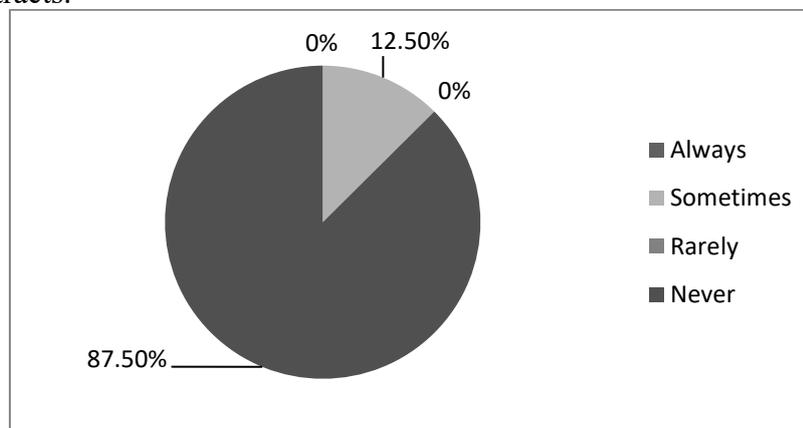


Figure 14 Results of Question 10 (B)

As regards to question 10, item (C), which asks if the abstract includes Sources, 4 lectures (25%) chose sometimes, 4 lectures (25%) went to rarely and 8 lectures (50%) went to never.

The responses to this question varied from sometimes to rarely, and never, yet the highest ratio was 'never' which indicates that students' abstracts almost never include Sources.

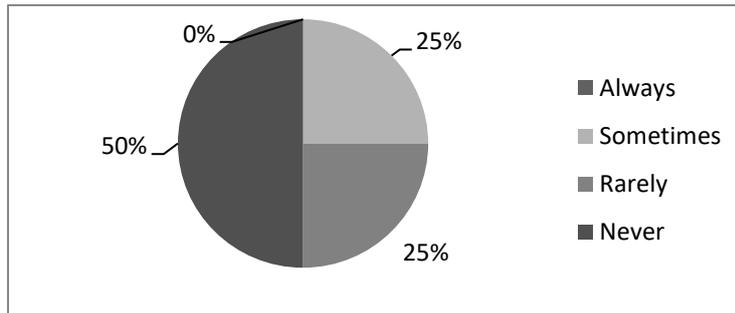


Figure 15 Results of Question 10 (C)

In terms of question 10, item (D), which asks if the abstract includes long quotations, 4 lectures (25%) chose sometimes, 6 lectures (37.5%) chose rarely and 6 lectures (37.5%) went to never. This result reveals that to some extent long quotations appear in students' abstracts.

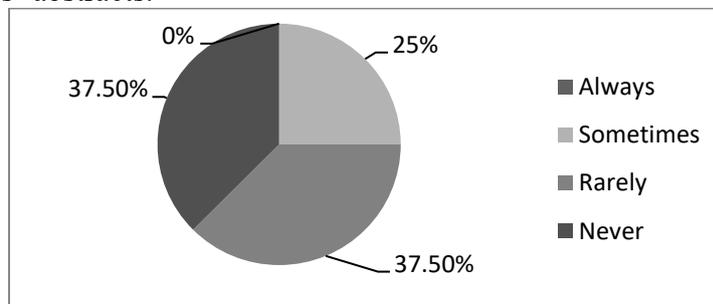


Figure 16 Results of Question 10 (D)

Regarding question 10, item (E), which asks if the abstract includes acronyms or abbreviations, 2 lectures (12.5%) went to always, 10 (62.5%) selected sometimes whereas 2 lectures (12.5%) chose rarely and 2 (12.5%) went to never. According to the respondents, this result also reveals that acronyms or abbreviations appear in students' abstracts.

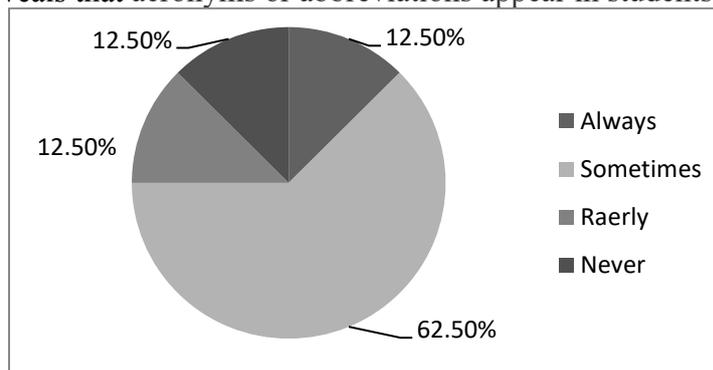


Figure 17 Results of Question 10 (E)

Regarding question 10, item (F), which asks if the abstract includes ambiguous references or phrases, 2 lectures (12.5%) went to always, 4 lectures (25%) went to sometimes, 6 lectures (37.5%) chose rarely and 4 lectures (25%) went to never. As stated by the respondents, this result indicates that to some extent ambiguous references or phrases appear in students' abstracts.

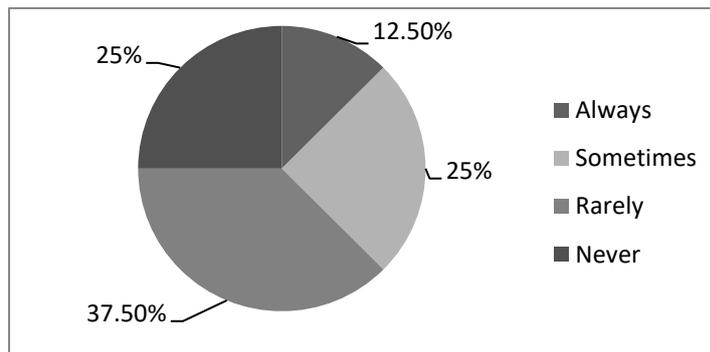


Figure 18 Results of Question 10 (F)

## Conclusion

The abstract is often the only opportunity for a research writer to persuade readers to keep reading. Therefore, it is important for an abstract to be written carefully to represent the central parts of the study, as well as captivates the audience. As discussed in the present paper, the essential parts of the abstract should be presented in proper structure so that a research writer will not miss any relevant information as follows: **Statement of the Problem/Background**, Objectives, Research Questions, Hypothesis, Description of the research method/s and design used in the investigation. Moreover, the conclusion reached (**The major findings/ Results/Summary of the Investigation**) and the Implications of the results to the world of scientific inquiry.

The results of the present paper showed that students have some problems in writing dissertation abstracts. They exclude some essential information from their abstracts such as providing a brief background, stating clearly the problem that the work attempts to solve, specifying clearly the scope of the research, indicating clearly the argument, thesis, or claim of the research. Moreover, some students write their abstracts in a poor language with spelling and grammatical mistakes, besides writing in the first person in some instances.

Additionally, some abstracts are too long because they include lengthy background information, new information which is not present in the paper or unnecessary details about the methods used. Furthermore, some students' abstracts include long quotations acronyms or abbreviations and ambiguous references or phrases.

## Recommendations

Post Graduate Students are recommended to be aware of the importance of abstracts and to pay more attention when writing their own abstracts or when reviewing others' research works. They should include only the essential parts of an abstract and exclude ambiguous references or phrases that will confuse the readers or mislead them about the content and objectives of the research. Unnecessary information should not be included. Only relevant and useful information should be provided. Abstracts that are too long are useless as they do not give specific information on the research paper. More importantly, before students start writing their abstracts, they should decide which type of abstract they need to write and which referencing system they should follow.

## References

Alnaggar, M., 2018 Abstract Template (APA) Available at:  
<https://writingcommons.org/evidence-documentation/apa-style> accessed on: 15/9/2019

*AMA Manual of Style!* Available at: <https://www.amamanualofstyle.com> accessed on  
24/September 2019

Bell, J. (1999) *Doing your research project* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Buckingham: Open University Press

Brown, L., 2019. *How Long Should an Abstract be?* Available at:  
<https://www.crowdwriter.com/blog/how-to-write-an-abstract-for-a-dissertation>  
Accessed on 4/9/2019

*Formatting Your Dissertation.* Harvard: Available at: <https://gsas.harvard.edu/degree-requirements/dissertations/formatting-your-dissertation>

Janecek, J. 2018. *Formatting the Abstract Page (APA)* Available at:  
<https://writingcommons.org/evidence-documentation/apa-style> accessed on: 15/9/2019

Kahn, J, E, K. ed. (1994). *How to Write and Speak Better.* The Reader's Digest Association Limited, London.

McCombes, S, 2019. *How to write an abstract*, retrieved from  
<https://www.scribbr.com/dissertation/abstract/> accessed on 16/10/2019

## Appendix 1

### Questionnaire questions

Dear colleague:

You are kindly requested to participate in this questionnaire. The questionnaire is a part of data collection for a research paper investigating postgraduate students' mistakes in writing dissertation abstracts. Your participation in this study is voluntary and anonymous. Your contribution is highly appreciated.

Please, indicate which of the following common mistakes appear in the students' abstracts:

- |  |                                     |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| 1. Students do not provide a brief background.<br>Never                              | Always - Sometimes - Rarely -       |
| 2. The problem that the work attempt to solve is not stated clearly.<br>Never        | Always - Sometimes - Rarely -       |
| 3. The scope of the research is not specified clearly.<br>Never                      | Always - Sometimes - Rarely -       |
| 4. The argument, thesis, or claim of the research is not indicated clearly.<br>Never | Always - Sometimes - Rarely -       |
| 5. The abstract is written in a poor language.<br>Never                              | Always - Sometimes - Rarely -       |
| 6. The abstract contains spelling mistakes.<br>Never                                 | Always - Sometimes - Rarely -       |
| 7. The abstract contains grammatical errors.<br>Never                                | Always - Sometimes - Rarely -       |
| 8. The abstract is written in the first person.<br>Never                             | Always - Sometimes - Rarely -       |
| 9. The abstract is too long because it includes:                                     |                                     |
| a) lengthy background information<br>Never   | Always - Sometimes - Rarely -       |
| b) new information that is not present in the paper<br>Never                         | Always - Sometimes - Rarely -       |
| c) unnecessary details about the methods used<br>Never                               | Always - Sometimes - Rarely -       |
| 10. The abstract includes:   |                                     |
| a) Tables  | Always - Sometimes - Rarely - Never |
| b) Figures   | Always - Sometimes - Rarely - Never |
| c) Sources   | Always - Sometimes - Rarely - Never |
| d) long quotations   | Always - Sometimes - Rarely - Never |
| e) acronyms or abbreviations   | Always - Sometimes - Rarely - Never |
| f) ambiguous references or phrases   | Always - Sometimes - Rarely - Never |

End of the questionnaire – Thank you for your participation. -

## Appendix 2

### ABSTRACT

This study to highlight the significance of using crossword puzzle strategy in teaching new English vocabulary at preparatory level. So, it will help both teachers and students, for teachers can carry out their tasks effectively with less effort, and as for students will be able to understand new English vocabulary in very effective way.

This study consists of five chapters starting with the introduction that contains some definition of vocabulary and crossword puzzle, then the second chapter presents the literature review, which deals with the previously studies on the topic. Then the third chapter the methodology applied in carrying out the study, the methodology, which are mainly questionnaire and interview along with pre and post-tests. The chapter four which deals with data analysis. Finally, the conclusion presents the introduction, finding, recommendation for further study, and summary which deals with the importance of introducing this method in teaching new English vocabulary for preparatory level.

## Appendix 3

### ABSTRACT

The main objective of this study is to investigate and analyze the errors encountered by some Al-Amal al-Akdar Secondary School students at third year of English specification in Aljmel in using passive voice in written English in order to find out the main causes behind the errors committed which may affect their learning of English.

This study falls into five chapters:

Chapter one is an introductory chapter. It deals with problem encountered by the students. It also focuses on the hypothesis, the aim and significance of the study.

Chapter two is devoted to a discussion of the nature of the passive voice, definition, uses and its formation.

Chapter three (practical part) deals with one pat process of teaching and learning of passive voice at the third secondary class in Aljmel. The data for the study are collected using both a test for students and questionnaire for teachers. Twelve teachers responded to the questionnaire and fifty students to the test from the school.

The results and the discussions of both techniques (test for students and questionnaire for teachers) are explained in chapter four.

The conclusion of the study is presented in chapter five. Some recommendations in view of the results obtained are also given in this chapter.