

## AN ANALYSIS OF RHETORICAL MOVES IN ABSTRACTS FOR CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

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### Abstract

An abstract plays a pivotal role because it represents the summary of the entire article. Therefore, it is the first thing that readers evaluate to determine if they should read the entire article. Hence, it is imperative for academics to provide an abstract that includes all essential rhetorical moves when writing an academic article. In lieu of this, the current study attempted to examine whether the abstracts provided in conference proceedings include the essential rhetorical moves and whether the moves are presented in the sequence according to the selected classification. The data for this study were collected using purposive sampling from 23 abstracts of empirical-based studies in nature from the selected conference. The abstracts were written in the English language and authored by academics in the field of language and education from higher institutions in various countries. Hyland's (2000) five-moves classification of rhetorical moves was used as the coding in identifying the moves structure of the selected abstracts in this study. Other moves that emerged from the selected abstracts were added to Hyland's (2000) classification. The moves structure data were analyzed using manifest content analysis while the sequence of moves data were analyzed using latent content analysis. The findings show that the majority of the abstract only partially contains the rhetorical moves as suggested by Hyland (2000) with a variety of moves sequence. Apart from Hyland's (2000) five-moves, some authors included the theoretical aspect of their study in their abstracts. The implications of the findings were discussed within the context of professional development among higher institutions academics, particularly in academic abstract writing.

**Keywords:** Abstract, academics, academic writing, rhetorical moves, conference proceedings

### 1 INTRODUCTION

Academic conferences are one of the platforms for academics to share and disseminate new knowledge. However, writing research reports can be a daunting task, especially when writing in other than one's native language. Many academics are capable to conduct research of remarkable values but unable to report their research well in the form of writing. Research skills and writing skills are two modular domains. A skilful

researcher does not translate to a skilful writer. Writing is an acquired skill. Therefore, it is imperative, particularly for academics to be able to present their research well and as intended in the form of writing. Nowadays, the majority of conferences use English as the medium of research presentation. Hence, having the required skills in the English language writing among academics is essential. One of the research writing skills that an academic needs to have is abstract writing.

Past studies have investigated different parts of research writing such as introductions (e.g., Bunton, 2002; Samraj), literature review (e.g., Kwan, 2006), and conclusion (e.g., Bunton, 2005). Studies on abstracts in research articles have been conducted rather extensively (e.g., Bonn & Swales, 2007; Cross & Oppenheim, 2006; Hyland, 2000; Lau, 2004; Lores, 2004; Hongwei Ren & Yuying Li, 2011; Pho, 2008; Suntara & Usaha, 2013; Stotesbury, 2003). A study on abstracts in theses for foreign language master's degree and published articles was conducted by Hongwei and Yuying (2011). Based on extensive studies on abstracts in published articles, Hyland (2000) synthesized the various classifications found in abstracts into five rhetorical moves structure, namely Introduction, Purpose, Method, Product and Conclusion. The moves suggested by other researchers on abstract studies (e.g., Huckin, 2006; Lores, 2004; Melander et al., 1997; Samraj, 2005; Santos, 1996) are subsumed in Hyland's (2000) rhetorical moves for abstracts.

Despite the extensive studies on abstract in published articles and graduate theses, studies on abstracts in conference proceedings seem to be rather scarce. Unlike published articles, conference proceedings are reviewed in a more flexible manner because unlike journal publications, the purpose of a conference is to provide a venue for a vast participation of different level of writers and researchers. Thus, the way proceedings are written tends to be influenced by such leniency although it is important for academics to present quality writing at all times so that their research can be well comprehended and presented. An abstract is the first part of an academic article that readers will read in order to determine the relevancy of the article to the readers (e.g., Hongwei & Yuying 2011). Hence, it acts as readers' screening device (Huckin, 2006). Therefore, the quality of an abstract and its persuasiveness becomes crucial in commanding readers' interest to read the entire article. As such, it is crucial for writers to ensure that they use effective rhetorical choices in their abstract and follow appropriate sequence of the rhetorical moves when developing their abstracts in order to increase the rate of their article being read in its entirety. Within the context of conference proceedings, the need to write an abstract with effective rhetorical choices is of no less importance than in published articles because it still reflects the writer's academic credibility.

Hence, considering the importance of a sustained quality of academic writing and the scarcity of studies on abstracts for conference proceedings, the current study attempted to analyse abstract writing for conference proceeding as to the extent to which they meet the standard abstract rhetorical moves.

## **2 METHODOLOGY SECTION**

The purpose of the current study was to examine whether the abstracts provided in conference proceedings include the essential rhetorical moves and whether the moves are presented in the sequence according to the selected classification. Therefore, the study pursued the following research following:

Research Question 1: Do the abstracts in conference proceedings include the essential rhetorical moves?

Research Question 2: Do the abstracts in conference proceedings follow the rhetorical moves sequence?

### **2.1 Research Context**

The selected conference for this study was an international conference organized by a public higher institution in Malaysia. The conference tailored for all sub-fields in language and education. Therefore, the themes of the conference were rather extant. The papers accepted for the conference were in the forms of theoretical papers, conceptual papers and empirical-based papers. The participants in the selected conference were allowed to write their papers in one of the three languages; Malay, English or Arabic.

### **2.2 Instrument**

The selected conference abstract book was used in selecting the abstracts that were relevant for the current study. The abstract book comprises all abstracts that were accepted for the conference. The abstracts were numbered by a computer system as it was received by the system. The abstract was divided into two sections. The first section comprises abstract written in English and Malay while the second section of the book comprises abstracts written in Arabic. Hence, only the first part of the abstract book was relevant to the current study.

## 2.3 Samples

The current study examined abstracts in the selected conference written in English only regardless of the academic discipline or topics. In selecting the samples for the study, the first section of the abstract book, which comprises the abstract written in English and Malay, was first screened according to the language of each abstract. In the initial screening phase, all abstract in Malay were excluded. The second phase of the screening was to identify abstracts for empirical studies. Therefore, all abstracts for theoretical and conceptual papers were excluded. The screening yielded 23 abstracts for studies, which are empirical in nature. The reason of selecting only abstracts for empirical studies was due to the use and the sequence of rhetorical moves, as suggested by Hyland (2000), in abstracts for empirical studies papers are more explicit and relevant than abstracts in theoretical or conceptual papers.

## 2.4 Data Collection

The abstracts in conference proceedings from the selected conference were examined according to Hyland's (2000) five-moves classification of rhetorical moves. Based on the preliminary review of the selected abstract, Hyland's (2000) Introduction move was detailed into two sub-categories namely Problem and Theory. Some of the abstracts present both the research problem and the theory in its Introduction move. Therefore, Hyland's (2000) model was revised by detailing the Introduction move into Problem move and Theory move, and retaining Hyland's (2000) Purpose, Method, Product and Conclusion moves in the revised model. These moves were applied in reviewing the moves structure of the selected abstracts in acquiring the data for the study. Two ESL (English as a second language) researchers validated the data classification. The validity index was 0.93.

## 2.5 Data Analysis

In order to answer Research Question 1, the selected abstract were analysed by tabulating the moves structure of each abstract according to the revised Hyland's (2000) moves category. The sample of tabulation is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Sample of Rhetorical Moves Tabulation

Abstract /Moves	Introduction		Purpose	Method	Product	Conclusion
	Problem	Theory				
1	/	/	/	/	/	/
2	/	/	x	/	/	/
3	x	x	/	/	/	x
4	x	/	/	/	/	x
5	x	x	/	/	/	/
6	x	x	/	/	/	/
7	x	x	/	/	/	/
8	x	/	/	x	/	x

Key: Move is present in the abstract = /; Move is absent in the abstract = x

To answer Research Question 2, the data were analysed by marking the presence and absence of each rhetorical move as in the revised Hyland's (2000) moves classification. Therefore, the coding used to analyze sequence was Introduction move (either the presence of Problem move or Theory move or both moves), Purpose move, Method move, Product move and Conclusion move. Hence, an abstract that has at least either component of the Introduction move (Problem move or Theory move) was considered to have sufficed the Introduction move. All missing moves in each abstract were recorded to determine if the abstract's moves structure in sequence or not. Abstracts that contain all the moves were categorized as abstracts with rhetorical moves sequential structure. On the other hand, abstracts that have missing moves were categorized as abstracts without rhetorical moves sequential structure. Table 2 presents a sample of the analysis of rhetorical moves sequential structure.

Table 2: Sample of Rhetorical Moves Sequential Structure Analysis

Abstract/ Sequence	Without Sequential Structure / Missing Move(s)	With Sequential Structure / No Missing Move
1	-	/
2	Pur	-
3	Int, Con	-
4	Con	-
5	Int	-
6	Int	-
7	Int	-
8	Met, Con	-
9	Met	-
10	Met	-
11	Int, Met, Pro	-

Key: Int=Introduction; Pur=Purpose; Met= Method; Pro=Product; Con=Conclusion

### 3 FINDINGS

The findings are presented in two parts; i) Rhetorical moves classification and ii) Rhetorical moves sequence. The rhetorical moves classification section presents the findings for Research Question 1 while rhetorical moves sequence presents the findings for Research Question 2.

#### 3.1 Rhetorical Moves Classification

Table 3 shows the rhetorical move analysis for the Introduction move, which is divided into the Problem move and the Theory move. Out of 23 abstracts, about 48 percent presented the research problem as the Introduction moves in their abstracts while approximately 35 percent use theory as their Introduction move. Only 17.4 percent of the selected abstracts incorporate both Problem and Theory moves as part of their Introduction move.

Table 3: Introduction Rhetorical Move Analysis

Moves	Introduction Move					
	Problem		Theory		Problem & Theory	
Total Abstracts ( <i>f</i> )	11		8		4	
Inclusion	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Percentage (%)	47.8	52.2	34.8	65.2	17.4	82.6

Table 4: Purpose Rhetorical Move Analysis

Move	Purpose Move	
Inclusion	Yes	No
Total Abstracts ( <i>f</i> )	18	5
Percentage (%)	78.3	21.7

Table 4 presents the rhetorical move analysis for the Purpose move. Approximately 78 percent of the selected abstracts contain the Purpose move and about 22 percent excluded the Purpose move.

Table 5: Method Rhetorical Move Analysis

Move	Method Move	
Inclusion	Yes	No
Total Abstracts ( <i>f</i> )	19	4
Percentage (%)	82.6	17.4

Table 5 demonstrates that approximately 83 percent of the selected abstracts comprise the Method move and only about 17 percent of the selected abstracts did not include the Method move.

Table 6: Product Rhetorical Move Analysis

Move	Product Move	
	Yes	No
Total Abstracts ( <i>f</i> )	22	1
Percentage (%)	95.7	4.3

Table 6 provides the statistics of the Product rhetorical move analysis. The majority of the selected abstracts (95.7%) included the Product move. Only 1 abstract (4.3%) did not include the Product move.

Table 7: Conclusion Rhetorical Move Analysis

Move	Conclusion Move	
	Yes	No
Total Abstracts ( <i>f</i> )	18	5
Percentage (%)	78.3	21.7

Table 7 depicts the findings of the Conclusion rhetorical move analysis. Approximately 78 percent of the abstracts included the Conclusion move while about 22 percent of the abstract were without the Conclusion move.

### 3.2 Rhetorical Moves Sequential Structure

This section presents the findings for Research Question 2. The findings are in the forms of overall analysis of rhetorical moves sequential structure and the types of missing moves structure.

Table 8: Overall Analysis of Abstract Rhetorical Moves Sequential Structure

Abstract With Sequential Structure	Abstract Without Sequential Structure
4 ( <i>f</i> )	19 ( <i>f</i> )
17.4 %	82.6 %
N=23	

Table 8 shows that the majority of the selected abstracts (82.6%) did not follow the rhetorical moves sequential structure. Only 4 abstracts (17.4%) followed the sequence.

Table 9: Analysis of Types of Missing Moves Structure

Missing Moves Structures	Frequency	Percentage (%)
(Int)-Pur-Met-Pro-Con	8	42.1
Int-(Pur)-Met-Pro-Con	2	10.5
Int-Pur-(Met)-Pro-Con	3	15.8
Int-Pur-Met-Pro-(Con)	1	5.3
(Int)-Pur-(Met)-(Pro)-Con	1	5.3
(Int)-Pur-Met-Pro-(Con)	2	10.5
Int-Pur-(Met)-Pro-(Con)	1	5.3
Int-(Pur)-Met-Pro-(Con)	1	5.3
N =19		

Key: (Int)= Missing Introduction move; (Pur)= Missing Purpose move; (Met)= Missing Method move; (Pro)= Missing Product move; (Con)= Missing Conclusion move

Table 9 exhibits that there are 9 types of missing moves structure that the authors of the selected abstracts committed. The data in this study yielded 8 types of missing moves structure. The most prominent is the (Int)-Pur-Met-Pro-Con type (42.1%) followed by the Int-Pur-(Met)-Pro-Con type (15.8%). The Int-(Pur)-Met-Pro-Con and (Int)-Pur-Met-Pro-(Con) types, both carry 10.5% in weight. The other types [Int-Pur-Met-Pro-(Con), (Int)-Pur-(Met)-(Pro)-Con, Int-Pur-(Met)-Pro-(Con), Int-(Pur)-Met-Pro-(Con)] carry an equal percentage (5.3%).

## 4 DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show that approximately 83 percent of the conference proceeding abstract writers have one or more missing rhetorical moves in their abstracts. This finding is despite the rhetorical moves identified by Hyland (2000) being commonly used in abstract writing. Providing the Introduction moves

seems to be disregarded by most of the authors. Based on the finding of this study, the majority of the authors (91.3%) began their abstracts with the Purpose move. This phenomenon could be due to the author's belief that providing the background of the study in the abstract is not necessary for readers to get the essence of their studies. When a move falls below 60 percent, such move can be considered as optional rather than conventional (e.g., Kanoksilapatham, 2005). In this study, three types of Introduction moves structure were identified, namely Problem move, Theory move and a combination of problem and Theory move. The existence of various forms could be because of there are no explicit standard rules for decision on moves for abstracts (e.g., Crookes, 1986).

Nonetheless, Santos (1996) considered the Purpose move as a constellated move to the Introduction move. Following Santos' (1996) abstract move principles, the Introduction move is not considered as conventional. In this study, the Purpose move carries 78.3 percent, a finding, which suggests that this move is a conventional rhetorical move, structure in abstract (e.g., Kanoksilapatham, 2005). Despite the majority of the authors providing the Purpose move in their abstracts, there are academics (21.7%) who did not include the Purpose move in their abstracts although the purpose of a study is a pivotal part that is to inform readers of the main reason the study was conducted. Without readers being informed of the purpose of the study, readers' understanding of the study could be handicapped at the abstract level. Since an abstract acts as readers' screening device (Huckin, 2006), the absence of the Purpose move might be at the expense of the article not being read. Hence, although within the context of this study the abstracts that do not have the Purpose move is regarded as minority comparatively, this finding prevails as an issue of concern as to the reasons those academics overlooked the inclusion of the Purpose move.

In terms of the inclusion of the Method move, 82.6% of the abstracts contain the Method move. Nevertheless, there are academics (17.4%) who did not include the Method move in their abstracts. This is rather baffling considering the abstracts selected for this study are for empirical studies in nature. Without including the Method move, an abstract can be considered obscure because the methodology of a research is the index of the legitimacy of the findings of the research. As such, an abstract without the Method move makes the findings presented in the abstract to be questionable because it is missing the basis of how the findings were derived. In addition, such a significant exclusion at the abstract level may reflect the author's deficit as an academic author and a researcher. This missing move could also result in the article not being read regardless of the actual quality of the study in the article since an abstract is a gateway to the full article (e.g., Hartley & Benjamin, 1998; Swales, 1990).

Sequentially, after the Method move is the provision of Product move in the abstract. The findings in the current study show that almost all academics whose abstracts were selected for this study acknowledge the importance of including the Product move in their abstracts. This finding also reflects awareness among academic that the output of this study is a must-mention in an abstract. Only one abstract is without the Product move; a statistic that can be waived because it could be due to unintentional human error.

As in the case of the finding of the Purpose move analysis, the majority of the selected abstract (78.3%) consist the Conclusion move. The Conclusion move comes primarily in the form of a statement of the discussion of implications. This form of Conclusion move is a common concluding remark in an academic research abstract. Since this study does not involve interviewing the authors of the selected abstracts, it is inconclusive as of the reason of the exclusion of the Conclusion move in about 28 percent of the selected abstracts. Nonetheless, the Conclusion move is optional in some disciplines such as in the field of linguistics but not in the field of applied linguistics (e.g., Suntura & Usaha, 2013).

In terms of the findings for rhetorical moves sequential structure analysis, the prominent finding is in alignment with the finding for Introduction move analysis. The most prominent moves structure sequence is Purpose-Method-Product-Conclusion (42.1%). The missing moves pattern seems to vary, ranging from a minimum one to maximum three missing moves. Although in this study the three missing moves such as in the Purpose-Conclusion moves structure was only found in one abstract, this finding has a significant adverse notion because it reflects an academic's knowledge and awareness of what an abstract should constitute, which is one of the basic knowledge in research report writing. In general, the various missing moves structures against Hyland's (2000) commonly identified moves structure raises the question on the level and extent of academic research report writing knowledge and skills among academics.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this small-scale study lend further insights into the needs of professional development among academics, particularly in academic research report writing. An academic should have the basic knowledge of what an abstract should fundamentally constitute. The absence of such knowledge and skills of academic

writing, particularly research report writing is commonly reflected in how the abstract is presented. Therefore, it is recommended that institutions of higher education provide the relevant professional development in order to ensure that academic researchers possess the required academic abstract writing skills.

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