

Preparation of English Abstracts for Journals on Surgery
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An abstract summarizes the important features of your research. It briefly tells what you did, why you did it, and how you did it, and presents your key findings, conclusions, and recommendations. It is the most important part of the research paper because other people will most likely judge the significance of your research based on the abstract. Unfortunately, the abstract is also the hardest part of a research paper to write. This fact is doubly true for authors writing in a second language. Because of this, it would be interesting to know what kinds of mistakes are typical in such abstracts and whether steps can be taken to eliminate those typical mistakes. To that end, corrections on abstracts submitted in 1997 for publication in the Journal of the Korean Surgical Society were reviewed with an eye toward detecting patterns of mistakes. Many typical mistakes were identified and are discussed in detail. However, in general, the mistakes could be categorized into two types: general mistakes, which were typical regardless of English proficiency, and specific mistakes, which depended on the level of English proficiency. Incorrect use of articles, to no surprise, and poor quality were the two most common general mistakes. Unfortunately, the use of articles is not something that can be mastered by study. It requires years of experience so that articles can be used without thinking. Poor quality was associated with abstracts which were written as introductions or literature reviews and which presented little or no information on the results and conclusions. Specific mistakes fell into three sub-categories based on a subjective evaluation of the author's English proficiency: those made by authors with little English proficiency, those made by authors with moderate proficiency, and those made by authors with excellent proficiency. In the first case, the mistakes were associated with incorrect vocabulary and improper sentence structure. This combination made it very difficult, if not impossible, to make corrections. In the second case, the choice of vocabulary was usually correct, but some Korean-style sentence structures were still seen. However, at the lower end of this category, the sentences were usually short, so someone with basic knowledge of Korean grammar could easily make corrections. However, as the language proficiency increased, so did the sentence length, making it more and more difficult to make corrections. Finally, in the last sub-category, the mistakes, except for the use of articles, were almost identical to those made by native speakers of English: misplaced modifiers, improper use of pronouns, and awkward sentence structure. These results suggest that sentence length should be limited to two to four clauses and highlight the need for someone to review and comment on your writing, not from the standpoint of spelling, punctuation, and simple grammar, but from the standpoint of readability, organization, and logical development.