

Year 3 Write an Abstract Assignment

For this assignment, you will write an abstract of an article we are reading for class. The assignment will develop your ability to read, comprehend, summarize, and assess a critical argument about a Shakespeare play.

You are probably familiar with abstracts from previous English classes, but this assignment asks you both to process and to analyze the argument thoroughly in order to understand how it is constructed. Thus your abstract won't simply summarize the argument point-by-point, as abstracts often do, but *reconstruct* the argument after you've disassembled it. The ultimate purpose of the assignment is for you to engage with other critical voices about a Shakespeare play. No matter how many abstracts you've written, therefore, you still stand to learn much from this assignment.

As you read the article, consider the following questions:

Audience – To whom is the article addressed? Shakespeare scholars? A specific subset of Shakespeareans? The general public? Undergraduate students? Readers who value certain kinds of inquiry or argumentation? Readers who have a particular stake in one or another issue?

Conversation – With whom is the author engaged? What critics does s/he cite most often, and with whom does s/he explicitly agree or disagree? What is the nature of the disagreement? Is it, for example, a disagreement over a particular moment in the play, over different ways of approaching the play, over some other question?

Argument – What are the premises of the argument? What is the author's stated thesis? What is the unstated thesis? Does the thesis encapsulate the whole essay? What counts as evidence? What evidence gets deemphasized? Of what is the author trying to convince us, even implicitly?

There is no best way to go about studying the article and writing the abstract, nor is there any perfect model for what the abstract should look like. There are general guidelines, however:

- Read the article at least twice.
- Annotate the article on every reading, and try various ways of getting a grasp on how the argument works (e.g., reverse engineer an outline; make a concept map or flowchart; write a sentence-length summary of each paragraph in the article).
- Try reading once with the grain and once against the grain, and compare the notes you take.
- When you begin to write the abstract, *put away the article* and use only your notes.
- Quote selectively from the article, but don't let quotations dominate. This is *your* abstract, and yours is the dominant voice your reader wants to hear.
- Don't write over one page, single-spaced. If you find yourself doing that, there's a good chance you haven't digested the article well enough.

A good abstract should provide a clear, sober summary of the chosen article. You should not agree or disagree explicitly with it (e.g., don't say "Karen Newman wrongly asserts that women become commodities in *Merchant...*"), but you should provide an accurate summary of the argument, *including its limitations*. For example, you should point out (or at least imply) that an argument is aimed at one audience but that it might not apply or make sense to another group. **The abstract is not a critique of the article, but it is also not a blissfully neutral summary. It is an *account* of the article's thesis, evidence, argumentative structure, and contribution to the critical conversation.**

Format: The abstract should be no more than one page, single-spaced, in 12 point Times New Roman font. A bibliographical citation of the article should precede the abstract.