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WRITING ABSTRACTS IN ENGLISH – GUIDELINES FOR SERBIAN AUTHORS

Abstract: Abstracts generally summarize key points of research studies, and as such, their main purpose is to attract the attention of potential readers. Thus, they should be well-written, concise, clear, and informative. This paper aims to provide basic guidelines for writing a good abstract in English, focusing mainly on linguistic aspects. Also, the paper addresses some common abstract-writing mistakes resulting from Serbian-English language differences that are usually overlooked or unrecognized by Serbian authors and available proofreading tools. The examples come from a corpus of 71 abstracts written in English by Serbian authors for the 11th International Scientific Conference *Special Education and Rehabilitation Today* in 2021. They illustrate some frequent errors, ways to correct them, and suggestions on how to achieve greater clarity and coherence in English sentences. Both versions (before and after the proofreading process) were analyzed. It was observed that sentences and structures in English abstracts were significantly affected by the rules, sentence patterns, and flexibility of the Serbian language.

Key words: abstract, writing, Serbian, English, guidelines, common mistakes

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INTRODUCTION

Abstracts provide summaries of research papers, their key points and findings, and aim to attract the attention of potential readers. Usually, readers, journal editors, and reviewers will read the whole research paper only if they find the abstract appealing (Hofmann, 2010: 312). Another purpose of abstracts is to convince scientific journal editors or conference committees to accept and publish the research paper they accompany (Katić et al., 2020). Furthermore, an abstract is often the only part of a paper, apart from the title, that is included in online search databases (Mackey & Gass, 2005: 310). Thus, writing a good abstract is an essential academic skill that should not be underestimated.

When writing abstracts in English, non-native authors may encounter difficulties arising from structural and cultural differences between their native language and English. Such difficulties often include sentence structure and word order, use of tenses, spelling conventions, punctuation, etc.

Another problem for non-native writers may be the lack of appropriate English academic writing courses at universities. Katić and Šafranj (2018) have found that dissertation abstracts depend on writers' preferences rather than on prescribed writing norms, mainly due to the lack of appropriate instruction on abstract writing conventions. They point out the necessity of incorporating academic writing instruction into English university courses across different disciplines and fields of research.

Based on the literature review, this paper presents basic principles and guidelines for writing a competitive abstract in English. In addition, by reviewing numerous abstracts written in English by Serbian researchers, this paper addresses some typical mistakes resulting from Serbian-English language differences that are usually overlooked or unrecognized by writers or available proofreading tools.

LITERATURE REVIEW

When writing an abstract, the first rule should always be to follow the instructions for authors of the target scientific publication. This means that we should pay attention to the required abstract type, whether or not it should be structured, the subheadings, the number of words, etc. Although concise, abstracts should follow the general organization of the research paper (Hofmann, 2010: 314). Thus, they should clearly state the topic and aim of the research, briefly describe the sample and methods, summarize the results, and state the relevance and implications of the study (Mackey & Gass, 2005: 310).

Hofmann (2010: 317) lists the following basic abstract-writing principles: using simple words and short sentences, avoiding jargon and abbreviations, and providing clarity

by repeating keywords and using parallel form. As for verb tenses, the rules are fairly simple. Present tense is used in statements that are still true (e.g., introduction and conclusion). However, it is advisable to use the past tense when referring to research results since the assessments, examinations, or experiments described are already finished (Hofmann, 2010: 317).

As pieces of academic writing, abstracts are typically written in formal language, although the levels of formality may differ. Thus, for example, authors should choose full verb forms instead of short ones, use more formal linking words (e.g., however, moreover), use forms that sound impersonal and objective, etc. In analyzing abstracts written by Czech university students, Klimova (2013) determines that some of the most common mistakes refer to objectivity, i.e., overuse of the first-person pronoun “I” and active forms. Although passive voice is used in academic writing to sound more formal and impersonal, the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (2020) warns that many writers tend to overuse passive and advises that authors choose voice carefully and use active sentences to be more direct, concise, and clear.

Formality does not imply using complex or ambiguous language and style. Formality in scientific writing can be achieved through the appropriate choice of vocabulary and grammar forms rather than long and ambiguous sentences (Ivančević Otanjac & Milojević, 2015: 117). The first principle of good academic writing is the Clarity Principle, stating that “a writer should make everything clear to the reader”, i.e., that authors should bear in mind the potential audience and their needs and provide clear texts for them (Hamp-Lyons & Hasley, 2006: 50).

Hofmann (2010: 319) states that excessive length is one of the main problems of abstract writing. This is particularly true for Serbian authors who are used to writing long and complex sentences in Serbian. In their study on writing research articles in English, Mirović and Knežević (2018: 92) list the lack of conciseness in writing as one of the most frequent problems of Serbian writers. They go on to explain that this can be attributed to the writing characteristics in Slavic languages that tend to use complex structures and digressions (Čmejrkova, 1996: 13 in Mirović & Knežević, 2018: 92). Kerničan and Mičić (2008: 206) state that long and complex sentences are typical of research papers written in Serbian, while the English language is characterized by short sentences and clear structures. These authors offer suggestions and examples of how to make sentences shorter, divide them into two to achieve clarity, change verb forms, and use different words and phrases to be more concise and avoid repetitions.

Incorrect word order has also been proven to be a common mistake of non-native authors writing abstracts in English (Klimova, 2013). English follows a fixed SVO (subject-

verb-object) pattern. On the other hand, many languages, especially Slavic ones with grammatical cases, have a much more flexible word order and, thus, sentence patterns different from English. This may result in writing sentences in English that are ambiguous and grammatically incorrect.

With the advancement of various online proofreading and writing assistant tools, it is necessary to address their use in writing abstracts in English. While such AI tools can nowadays very successfully correct typical grammar mistakes (e.g., the use of articles or prepositions), offer a better choice of words and collocations, and even suggest how to split sentences and make the text more concise, they often fail to recognize the unnatural word order or tenses taken over from another language. Furthermore, the inability of AI tools to recognize the scientific context or understand and analyze the topic may lead to inappropriate and inconsistent use of spelling variations, abbreviations, punctuation, and capitalization. As suggested by Salvagno et al. (2023), AI-generated texts often lack originality, nuance, and style, and they can be vague and contain inconsistencies. In a research study that compared AI-generated scientific abstracts and real abstracts, the blinded human reviewers commented that the abstracts they identified as generated were vague, superficial, and more formulaic (Gao et al., 2023).

To sum up, some of the basic guidelines for writing a good abstract in English include the following:

- follow the provided instructions for authors;
- do not exceed the maximum number of words;
- be sure to write the correct type of abstract (for a review paper or a research article);
- use formal but clear language;
- be concise and use short sentences;
- avoid jargon, abbreviations, and too much data;
- follow the general organization of the research paper (refer to the topic, aim, sample, methods, and implications of the study);
- use past tense when describing research results and present tense for statements that are still true;
- use passive voice to sound impersonal and objective;
- do not overuse passive structures and use active sentences for direct, clear, and concise sentences;

- follow the English SVO sentence pattern;
- be careful when using online writing assistants and proofreading tools, and do not rely solely on them.

METHODOLOGY – COLLECTION OF DATA

A total of 71 abstracts written in English by Serbian authors were reviewed to analyze common mistakes that result from Serbian-English language differences. Both versions (before and after the proofreading process) were analyzed. The edited versions of abstracts were published in the Book of Abstracts of the 11th International Scientific Conference *Special Education and Rehabilitation Today* (Jablan, 2021). All examples used in this paper to illustrate the frequent mistakes of Serbian authors were taken from the mentioned corpus of abstracts. The suggested corrections and improvements were made by the author of this paper during the proofreading process.

The analysis focuses on common mistakes resulting from Serbian-English language differences, including sentence length and complexity, word order, use of appropriate tenses and verb forms, punctuation and abbreviations, and capitalization in titles. The paper also points out the types of mistakes found to be commonly overlooked by online writing assistants and proofreading tools.

DATA INTERPRETATION

Long and complex sentences

Wordiness and redundancy should be avoided in English scientific writing. Some typical examples of how longer phrases commonly found in the reviewed abstracts can successfully be shortened to achieve clarity are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

FIRST VERSION	EDITED VERSION
<i>imply the use of</i>	<i>imply using</i>
<i>results of research; disabilities in development</i>	<i>research results; developmental disabilities</i>
<i>children at preschool age</i>	<i>preschool children</i>
<i>for the achievement of</i>	<i>to achieve</i>
<i>the level of education of the participants</i>	<i>the participants' level of education</i>

<i>the obtained results; with increasing age</i>	<i>the results; with age</i>
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The examples in Table 1 show the following ways of making the phrases shorter and clearer:

- using gerund instead of a noun phrase;
- using different wording to avoid a prepositional phrase;
- replacing a longer noun phrase with an adjective;
- using to-infinitive instead of a complex prepositional phrase;
- using the possessive case to avoid two of-phrases in a row;
- avoiding unnecessary words that would normally be used in Serbian but are excessive in English.

Another common misconception of Serbian writers is that they need to use complex sentences and language to sound academic and formal. Long and unnatural sentences often result from inappropriate translations of typically Serbian sentence structures into English. Table 2 shows several examples of excessively long and complex sentences from the reviewed abstracts and how they were edited during the proofreading process:

Table 2

FIRST VERSION	EDITED VERSION
The population of the research consisted of minors who in 2021 were on the basis of the institutional measure of referral, which is carried out in a correctional facility.	The research included minors referred to a correctional facility in 2021.
The collection of the literature was performed...	The literature was collected...
This paper is of a review type.	This is a review paper.

Since it was ungrammatical in its original version, the first sentence in Table 2 was completely rephrased by shortening and avoiding complex noun phrases, ambiguous prepositional phrases, and relative clauses and by placing the time adverbial at the end. The second example illustrates how coherence can be achieved by changing the choice of the verb to avoid a complex noun phrase at the beginning. In the third example, a simple adjective

replaced a prepositional phrase, thus making the sentence shorter and clearer.

Word order

The reviewed abstracts indicate that the flexibility of Serbian word order may cause problems when writing in English. Due to its grammatical cases and rich inflection system, Serbian is much more flexible than English. Kitić (2002: 303) states that the fixed word order in English serves as its main syntactic means, while the free word order in Serbian is mainly a pragmatic and stylistic means.

By reviewing abstracts of papers written in English by Serbian researchers, it was observed that word order problems frequently occur in the use of adverbial phrases. As illustrated by the examples in Table 3, Serbian authors tend to put adverbial phrases at the beginning or in the middle of sentences. While such adverbial positions are not unusual in Serbian sentences, they may sound unnatural in English, where adverbial phrases most often go at the end.

Table 3

FIRST VERSION	EDITED VERSION
The results showed, <i>according to years of work experience</i> , differences in teachers' opinions.	The results showed differences in teachers' opinions <i>depending on years of work experience</i> .
<i>In the form of a questionnaire with an assessment scale</i> , parents answered questions related to distance education.	Parents answered questions related to distance education <i>in the form of a questionnaire with an assessment scale</i> .
<i>For this purpose, in the study</i> , a questionnaire for determining the needs of preschool teachers developed by the researchers was applied.	A questionnaire for determining the needs of preschool teachers was developed <i>for the purpose of this study</i> .
<i>In more detail</i> , the relationship was examined.	The relationship was examined <i>in more detail</i> .
<i>As research instruments</i> , the following scales were used:	The following scales were used <i>as research instruments</i> :
<i>To assess executive functions</i> , the Stroop test was used.	The Stroop test was used <i>to assess executive functions</i> .

The structure of the first sentence in Table 3 is SVAO (an adverbial phrase (A) is placed between the verb and the object). However, a much more natural pattern of English sentences is SVOA (subject-verb-object-adverbial), as illustrated by the edited version of the

same sentence. The remaining examples all illustrate the use of different adverbial phrases (prepositional and infinitive phrases functioning as adverbials) at the beginning of sentences. Although adverbials can be used at the beginning of sentences for emphasis, it was observed that such positioning tends to be overused by Serbian authors. Placing adverbials at the end of the examples in Table 3 achieves greater clarity and coherence.

Sometimes, the English sentence is completely incorrect due to the wrong, often typically Serbian, word order (Table 4).

Table 4

FIRST VERSION	EDITED VERSION
<i>In work with juvenile delinquents is recognized</i> as invaluable cooperation between the judiciary and the education system in criminal proceedings against juveniles.	Cooperation between the judiciary and the education system in criminal proceedings against juveniles is recognized as invaluable in working with juvenile delinquents.
<i>With inclusion come</i> many benefits.	Inclusion brings many benefits.
<i>In this research were used</i> the following instruments...	The following instruments were used in this research

While grammatical cases in the Serbian language allow for greater flexibility of sentence parts, the tendency of Serbian authors to apply similar structures in English may result in ambiguous and ungrammatical sentences, as illustrated in Table 4. All the examples presented above illustrate how the influence of flexible word order in Serbian may cause problems for Serbian authors when writing sentences in English, where it is best to follow the fixed SVO sentence pattern.

Word order problems are among the mistakes that online proofreading tools may fail to correct. While some examples from Tables 3 and 4 were recognized by an online tool as unnatural or incorrect, others were not. For example, the sentence “*With inclusion come many benefits*” from Table 4 was completely overlooked even though it is incorrect, and no suggestions for its correction were provided.

Tenses

The use of appropriate tense is another problem Serbian authors face when writing abstracts in English. As already mentioned above, it is common to use the present tense in English for statements that are still true, i.e., when providing the context or background and describing the implications of a study. On the other hand, the past tense is more common when referring to the results, as the activities that led to those results have already been

finished (Hofmann, 2010: 317). However, the reviewed abstracts show that Serbian writers tend to use the present tense throughout the whole abstract, again driven by the flexibility of the Serbian language. It is important to keep in mind the sequence of tenses in English and the fact that it is preferable to use the past tense for describing completed events (e.g., the aims, methods, or results of completed studies). Table 5 shows some of the typical phrases commonly found in the reviewed abstracts that should be in the past tense but are typically written in the present tense by Serbian authors.

Table 5

FIRST VERSION	EDITED VERSION
The aim of this research <i>is</i> to determine...	The aim of this research <i>was</i> to determine... or This research <i>aimed</i> to determine...
The sample <i>includes/consists of</i> ...	The sample <i>included/consisted of</i> ...
The following instruments <i>are</i> used...	The following instruments <i>were</i> used...
It was found that age <i>is</i> a significant factor...	It was found that age <i>was</i> a significant factor...

The examples in Table 5 illustrate the most commonly used phrases when describing the aim, method, and results in the reviewed abstracts. Although the rules regarding the choice of tenses are not strict, using the past tense when referring to completed studies is common practice. Also, due to the lack of scientific context, AI tools will usually not change the tenses in sentences presented in Table 5. Thus, it is up to authors or human proofreaders to choose the most appropriate tense or verb form and use them consistently.

Punctuation and abbreviations

Common punctuation problems in the reviewed abstracts include using a comma in decimal numbers, a period in dates and years, and incorrect punctuation of abbreviations such as e.g., i.e., et al., etc., where the comma is usually left out. Also, it frequently happens that a Serbian abbreviation is used instead of the English one (e.g., AS instead of M for arithmetic mean). While some of these mistakes will be recognized and corrected by a proofreading tool (e.g., punctuation of abbreviations and dates), the inability of these tools to understand the context and grasp the meaning may result in incorrect use of abbreviations or decimals. It is very important to note these differences as they may be crucial in avoiding further problems with clarity and data accuracy.

Capitalization

Kerničan and Mičić (2008: 208-209) found that capitalizing letters in English titles is also a frequent problem, which was confirmed in the abstracts analyzed in this study. Although not obligatory, it is common to capitalize every word in titles, names of institutions, or instruments in English, except for articles, prepositions, and conjunctions. However, this is not the case in Serbian and often leads to inconsistent capitalization in the same abstract (e.g., the names of instruments will usually be capitalized as they are taken over from English sources, but the paper title or names of institutions will be in sentence case – which is common in the Serbian language). Capitalization depends on the selected style guide and thus cannot be considered a mistake. However, inconsistent capitalization in one piece of writing is inappropriate and should be corrected.

CONCLUSION

This paper is the result of the author's long experience as a proofreader and translator of scientific papers. Based on the review of literature, it addresses some basic principles of good abstract writing in English. The paper also analyzes common mistakes of Serbian authors that occur repeatedly, regardless of whether or not the authors used some available proofreading or translating tools, and points out the mistakes that may be overlooked by such tools. Based on the analyzed corpus of abstracts, the most frequent mistakes of Serbian authors include problems with sentence length and ambiguity, word order and sentence patterns, inappropriate use of tenses, incorrect or inconsistent punctuation, use of abbreviations, and capitalization. The analysis showed that sentences and structures in English abstracts were significantly affected by the rules, sentence patterns, and flexibility of the Serbian language. Most of the analyzed mistakes result from language differences between Serbian and English and are often overlooked or unrecognized by Serbian writers and proofreading tools.

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PISANJE APSTRAKTA NA ENGLESKOM JEZIKU – SMERNICE ZA AUTORE IZ SRBIJE

Rezime: Ovaj rad je rezultat autorovog dugogodišnjeg iskustva kao lektora i prevodioca naučnih i stručnih radova. Cilj prvog dela rada je da navede kratke smernice za pisanje dobrih apstrakata na engleskom jeziku na osnovu pregleda literature. Uobičajene greške opisane i analizirane u drugom delu rada su one koje se često javljaju bez obzira da li autori koriste neke od dostupnih alata za lekturu ili prevodjenje. Iako ovi alati danas veoma uspešno ispravljaju tipične gramatičke greške (npr. upotrebu članova u engleskom jeziku), nude bolji izbor reči i kolokacija, pa čak i sugerišu kako razdvojiti rečenice i učiniti tekst konciznijim, često ne uspevaju da prepoznaju neadekvatan red reči ili upotrebu glagolskih vremena koji su direktno preuzeti iz drugih jezika. Na primer, alati za lekturu često neće ispraviti tipično srpski red reči u engleskoj rečenici, niti će ispraviti pogrešnu upotrebu sadašnjeg vremena u prikazu rezultata istraživanja. Nemogućnost alata za lekturu i prevođenje da prepoznaju naučni kontekst ili razumeju i analiziraju određenu temu može dovesti do neadekvatne upotrebe skraćenica, znakova interpunkcije i velikih slova. Stoga je ovaj rad usmeren na greške koje proističu iz razlika između srpskog i engleskog jezika, a koje autorima iz Srbije ili alatima za lekturu često promaknu ili ih isti ni ne prepoznaju.

Cljučne reči: apstrakt, pisanje, srpski, engleski, smernice, česte greške

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