

Structured Abstract Adoption in Nursing Journals: Trends and Disciplinary Differences

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This study investigates the historical adoption of structured abstracts (SA) in nursing journals from 1950 to 2024. Specifically, it examines changes in SA prevalence over time and across journal types and disciplinary orientations. Drawing on 6,604 articles from nine journals, the study identifies three phases of SA adoption: emergence in the 1990s, rapid expansion in the 2000s, and stabilization after 2010. Adoption varied considerably among journals. Those closely aligned with clinical medicine adopted SA earlier and more consistently, whereas journals with broader interdisciplinary or qualitative orientations showed slower uptake. These findings suggest that SA has become a widely accepted feature of scholarly communication in health-related fields while continuing to reflect disciplinary differences in research traditions and publishing practices. The study provides a longitudinal account of SA adoption and highlights its relevance to the standardization of academic communication and EAP instruction.

本研究では、1950年から2024年までの看護学関連ジャーナルにおける構造化抄録(SA)の導入動向を検討した。特に、SAの採用率が時間の経過とともにどのように変化したか、またジャーナルの種類や学問分野の特性によってどのような違いがみられるかを分析した。9誌・6,604本の論文を分析した結果、SAの導入には、1990年代の導入期、2000年代の急速な普及期、2010年以降の定着期という3つの段階が確認された。ジャーナル間には顕著な差異がみられ、臨床医学との関連が強いジャーナルでは早期かつ一貫した導入が進んだ一方、学際的あるいは質的研究を多く扱うジャーナルでは導入が緩やかであった。これらの結果は、SAが保健医療系分野の学術コミュニケーションに広く定着している一方で、その導入状況が分野ごとの

研究・出版慣行の違いを反映していることを示す。本研究は、SA導入の長期的推移を明らかにし、学術コミュニケーションの標準化やEAP教育への示唆を提供する。

Academic abstracts serve as the gateway to scholarly communication, functioning as concise summaries that allow readers to quickly determine the relevance and scope of a research article. In an era of information overload and digital indexing, the abstract has evolved from a simple narrative summary into a critical component of research dissemination. It not only previews the content but also acts as metadata for search engines, influences citation practices, and shapes the visibility of research in global databases.

The evolution of abstract formats reflects broader transformations in academic publishing. Historically, abstracts were unstructured, offering flexibility but often lacking clarity and consistency. This posed challenges for readers seeking specific information and for systematic reviewers relying on abstracts for preliminary screening. The introduction of structured abstracts (SA) in the late 1980s marked a turning point, driven by the need for transparency, reproducibility, and efficiency in scholarly communication. SA formats, characterized by segmented headings, such as Background, Methods, Results, and Conclusion, align closely with the IMRAD (Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion) structure and provide explicit rhetorical cues that enhance readability and facilitate information retrieval.

The adoption of SA formats is not uniform across disciplines. While medical and clinical journals embraced structured formats early, nursing and allied health journals have exhibited variability, reflecting epistemological differences and editorial priorities. Qualitative research traditions, for example, often resist rigid segmentation, favoring narrative flow and interpretive depth. These disciplinary tensions highlight the complexity of implementing standardized formats in diverse research contexts.

This study addresses these issues by examining the historical trajectory of SA adoption in nursing and related journals over a 74-year period (1950–2024). Drawing on a

comprehensive analysis of 6,604 articles from nine major journals, it traces patterns of SA uptake and identifies disciplinary differences, particularly between clinically oriented journals and those grounded in interdisciplinary or qualitative traditions. In situating these trends within broader shifts, such as the growing emphasis on evidence-based practice and increasing expectations for transparency in reporting standards, the study offers an updated account of how SA formats have become embedded in scholarly communication. The study also considers how these findings may inform English for academic purposes (EAP) instruction, where SA can provide a useful reference point for understanding academic text organization.

Literature Review

The evolution of abstract formats in scholarly publishing reflects broader transformations in academic communication, particularly the shift toward clarity, transparency, and standardization. Abstracts have served as brief summaries, often narrative in style, intended to provide readers with a general sense of an article's content. As databases and indexing systems became increasingly important in scholarly communication, concerns emerged regarding the ability of unstructured abstracts to support efficient information retrieval and screening (Haynes et al., 1990; Harbourt et al., 1995). Unstructured abstracts (UA), typically written as a single paragraph, lack explicit segmentation, which can obscure critical components such as research objectives, methods, and findings.

Origins and Early Advocacy for Structured Abstracts

The introduction of SA in the late 1980s marked a significant departure from traditional practices. Lock (1988) was among the first to mandate SA formats for clinical trials in the British Medical Journal (BMJ), citing the need for greater clarity and reproducibility. Haynes et al. (1990) reinforced this argument, demonstrating that SA improved the informativeness of summaries compared to their unstructured counterparts.

The International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) played a pivotal role in institutionalizing SA formats. Its recommendations, introduced in the early 1990s, encouraged biomedical journals to adopt structured headings aligned with the IMRAD framework. High-impact journals, such as JAMA and The Lancet, quickly followed suit, setting a precedent for other disciplines. By the mid-1990s, SA formats were widely recognized as the best practice in clinical medicine, supported by empirical evidence of

their benefits for information retrieval (Harbourt et al., 1995) and research reporting (Haynes et al., 1990).

Benefits of Structured Abstracts

Research consistently highlights the advantages of SA formats. Harbourt et al. (1995) found that SA significantly improved indexing accuracy in MEDLINE, facilitating more efficient literature searches. Prior research has shown that structured abstracts are perceived by readers and editors as clearer, more informative, and easier to evaluate than traditional unstructured abstracts (Haynes et al., 1990; Harbourt et al., 1995; Nakayama et al., 2005).

Recent studies extend these findings to contemporary publishing contexts. Roux and Burke (2024) argue that SA not only improves clarity but also bridges the gap between research and practice in applied fields such as organizational sciences. Çelik and Al (2024) introduce the structured abstract generator (SAG) model, leveraging computational tools to automate SA creation and enhance readability in digital environments. These innovations reflect the adaptability of SA formats to evolving technological landscapes and their potential to streamline scholarly communication.

Disciplinary Variations and Challenges

Despite widespread endorsement, SA adoption remains uneven across disciplines. Nursing journals, for example, exhibit variability in implementation, reflecting tensions between quantitative and qualitative paradigms. Aoki and Onodera (2004) observed that while nursing editors acknowledged the value of SA, enforcement was inconsistent, particularly in journals publishing qualitative research. This reluctance stems from epistemological differences: Qualitative studies often prioritize narrative flow and contextual depth, which may conflict with the rigid segmentation of SA formats.

Similar patterns can be observed in psychology and related social sciences. Although the American Psychological Association recommends structured abstracts for empirical studies (APA, 2019), implementation varies across journals. In some education and humanities contexts, abstract structures remain more flexible and may place greater emphasis on narrative presentation than is typical in highly standardized scientific disciplines (Hyland, 2004; Swales, 1990). These disciplinary differences highlight the complex interplay between genre conventions, methodological orientations, and editorial policies.

Structured Abstracts and Reporting Standards

The growing influence of reporting guidelines has strengthened support for structured abstracts across health-related disciplines. Organizations such as the CONSORT Group and ICMJE emphasize the importance of structured reporting to improve transparency, completeness, and accessibility. Structured abstracts are particularly valuable in evidence-based practice because they enable readers to identify key methodological and outcome information quickly and consistently. As systematic reviews and meta-analyses have become increasingly important in healthcare research, the need for standardized reporting formats has likewise increased.

The relationship between structured abstracts and reporting quality has also received growing attention in recent years. In their evaluation of critical care nursing journals, Villa et al. (2023) found poor adherence to the Consolidated Standards of Reporting Trials for Abstracts (CONSORT-A) standards, underscoring the need for stricter enforcement of SA formats to improve reporting quality. Ebbers et al. (2022) drew parallels between SA and structured clinical documentation—both of which enhance clarity and usability—reinforcing the broader trend toward standardization in health communication.

Pedagogical Perspectives

Beyond their functional role in publishing, SA has been discussed for their potential pedagogical relevance. Early genre research, such as Swales (1990), emphasized the value of helping learners recognize the conventional structures of academic texts, while Hyland (2004) highlighted how disciplinary and rhetorical contexts shape academic writing practices. From this perspective, SA formats can offer accessible models of information organization, which may support novice writers as they navigate complex research genres.

More recent scholars have continued to explore these possibilities. Studies such as ElSerty (2024), Yaylı (2024), Wingate (2024), and Walková (2024) consider how structured formats, including SA, might be incorporated into EAP instruction to raise genre awareness or provide optional scaffolds for learners. Even though the extent of their effectiveness varies across contexts, this line of research suggests that SA structures may serve as one useful resource among the broader set of approaches to teaching academic writing in multilingual classrooms.

Emerging Trends and Future Directions

The future of SA is shaped by technological innovation and evolving publishing norms. Automated tools, such as the Structured Abstract Generator (SAG) (Çelik & Al, 2024), promise to reduce the author's burden and ensure compliance with reporting standards. At the same time, debates persist regarding the adaptability of SA formats to qualitative research and interdisciplinary contexts. Scholars call for flexible templates that accommodate narrative elements without compromising clarity, reflecting a need for a balance between standardization and creativity.

In sum, the literature shows the multifaceted role of SA in enhancing scholarly communication, supporting evidence-based practice, and promoting academic literacy. Although challenges remain particularly in disciplines resistant to rigid formatting, the trajectory of SA adoption suggests a continued shift toward structured, transparent, and accessible research reporting.

Research Questions

In light of these considerations, this study seeks to examine how SA has developed within nursing and related fields and how adoption patterns differ across disciplinary contexts. To address these aims, the analysis is guided by the following research questions:

- RQ1: How has the adoption of structured abstracts evolved in nursing journals between 1950 and 2024?
- RQ2: What differences can be observed in structured abstract adoption across disciplinary orientations and publication profiles?

Methodology

This study employed a longitudinal bibliometric analysis to examine the historical adoption of SA across nursing and other-related journals over a 74-year period (1950–2024). We adopted a quantitative descriptive approach, supplemented by qualitative observations of editorial policies and disciplinary contexts. Bibliometric analysis was chosen because it enables systematic examination of large datasets, capturing temporal patterns and structural changes in scholarly communication.

Nine journals were selected based on the following criteria:

- **disciplinary relevance:** Journals representing nursing, medicine, nutrition, psychology, and aging were included to allow cross-disciplinary comparison.

- **longevity:** Each journal had a publication history of at least 35 years, ensuring sufficient longitudinal data.
- **indexing:** Inclusion in major databases such as Scopus guaranteed accessibility and standardized metadata.
- **impact and editorial influence:** Highly cited journals within their respective disciplines were prioritized, as these journals often influence editorial practices and help establish disciplinary norms.

Applying these criteria resulted in a final sample of eight experimental research journals and one review-focused journal, providing a balance between empirical and theoretical orientations.

The dataset consisted of 6,604 articles published between 1950 and 2024. Articles were extracted from Scopus (Elsevier, n.d.) using advanced search filters for publication year, journal name, and article type. Only articles classified as “Original Research” or “Research Articles” were included, excluding editorials, letters, and commentaries to maintain consistency. For each article, metadata were collected on the publication year, journal title, article title, first author, abstract text, and abstract format (structured or unstructured). Abstracts were manually coded into two primary categories:

- structured abstracts (SA): Abstracts containing labeled sections, such as Background, Methods, Results, and Conclusion
- unstructured abstracts (UA): Abstracts presented as a single paragraph without segmentation

Hybrid formats (e.g., graphical abstracts or partially structured summaries) were noted but excluded from the core analysis. Abstracts were classified according to the presence or absence of explicit section headings (e.g., Background, Methods, Results, and Conclusion) and common heading variants, such as Objectives and Aims. To improve coding consistency, the researchers jointly reviewed an initial set of 30 articles in several rounds. After coding approximately 10 articles at a time, classifications were compared and discussed, and the coding criteria were refined when necessary. This iterative process continued until a shared understanding of the classification categories was established, after which the remaining articles were coded using the agreed criteria.

Data were then aggregated by year and journal, enabling calculation of the annual SA adoption rates, cumulative adoption rates, and journal-specific averages. Temporal trends were analyzed by grouping data into five-year intervals, facilitating identification of adoption phases (e.g., “initial emergence,” “rapid expansion,” “stabilization,”). Journals were further categorized by disciplinary orientation (clinical vs. interdisciplinary) to

explore epistemological influences. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages) were computed using Excel.

To examine the role of editorial policies, journals affiliated with the ICMJE were flagged. Adoption timelines were compared between ICMJE-affiliated and non-affiliated journals to assess the impact of international guidelines on formatting practices.

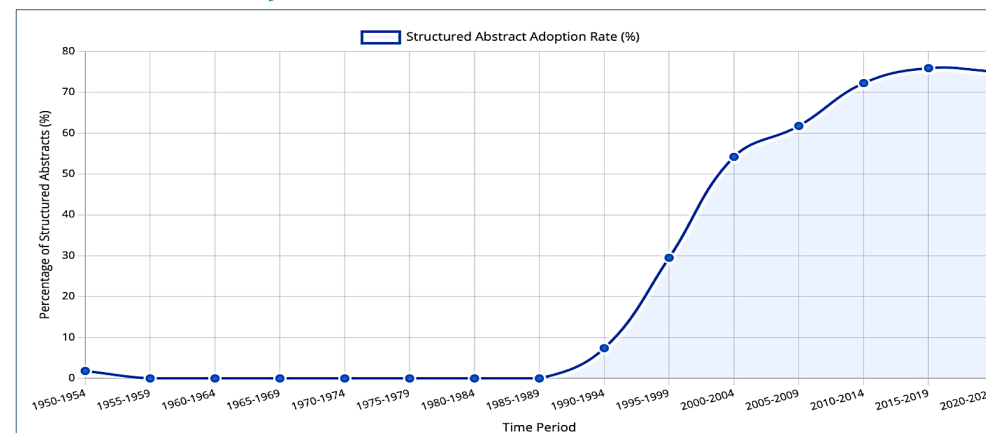
Results

Overall Temporal Trends (1950–2024)

Across nine journals and 6,604 original research articles, the adoption of SA showed three clear phases: an initial rise in the 1990s, rapid growth through the 2000s, and stabilization at a high level after 2010. Specifically, SA prevalence increased from 7.40% between 1990 and 1994 to 29.52% between 1995 and 1999, then jumped to 54.21% between 2000 and 2004 and 61.78% between 2005 and 2009. It reached 72.25% between 2010 and 2014 and remained largely stable from the mid 2010s (75.91% for 2015–2019 and 75.11% for 2020–2024), indicating consolidation of up to 75% over the last decade and a half (see Figure 1 for details).

These results confirm that SA formats were virtually absent for most years prior to 1990 (with only a single instance in 1951) and then diffused quickly once major medical editors began promoting structured reporting.

Figure 1
Structured Abstract Adoption Over Time



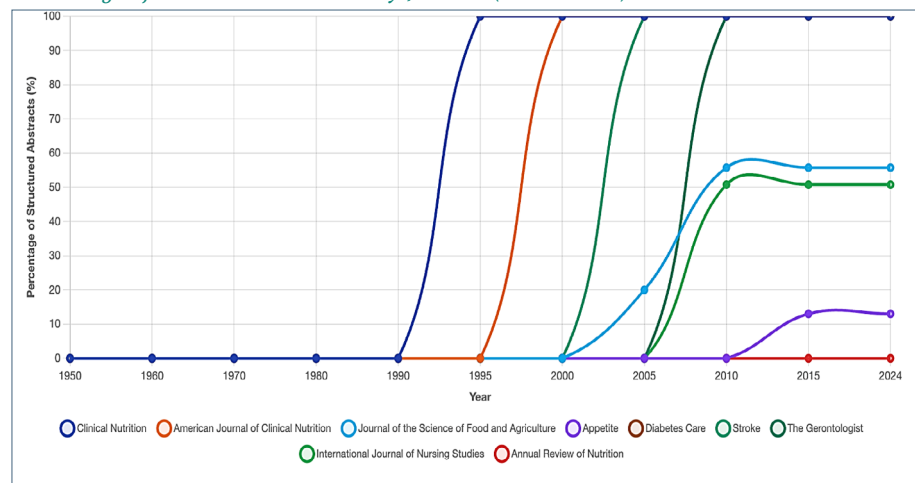
Journal-Level Patterns

Adoption was uneven across journals, reflecting differences in disciplinary scope and editorial policies. Several journals achieved near-complete adoption of structured abstracts over time; the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* (AJCN), *Diabetes Care*, *Stroke*, the *Journal of the Science of Food and Agriculture* (JSFA), and *The Gerontologist* all reached or approached full adoption by the 2000s or early 2010s. AJCN moved from 19.59% between 1995 and 1999 to 100% in the 2000–2004 period. *Diabetes Care* reached 88.24% between 1990 and 1994 and standardized at 100% by the 2000–2004 period. *Stroke* achieved 100% adoption between 1995 and 1999 and maintained rates above 90% thereafter. Likewise, JSFA increased from 30.93% in the 2005–2009 period to 100% in the 2010–2014 period.

Other journals showed more gradual trajectories. *Clinical Nutrition* rose from 8.33% between 1995 and 1999 to 93.75% in the 2005–2009 period, while the *International Journal of Nursing Studies* (IJNS) increased from 1.92% between 2000 and 2004 to 97.87% in the 2010–2014 period. By contrast, *Appetite* exhibited only limited uptake, increasing from 2.27% between 2000 and 2004 to approximately 13% from 2015 onward.

A notable exception was the *Annual Review of Nutrition*, which maintained the use of unstructured abstracts throughout the study period, consistent with its review-focused scope and the genre conventions of comprehensive review articles (see Figure 2 for details).

Figure 2
Percentage of Structured Abstracts by Journal (1950-2024)



Discussion

Disciplinary Differences: Clinical Alignment Versus Breadth of Scope

The observed differences in adoption rates suggest that disciplinary orientation may have played a role in shaping the diffusion of structured abstracts across journals. Journals closely aligned with clinical medicine, such as the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, *Diabetes Care*, and *Stroke*—where reproducibility, concise method/result visibility, and rapid information retrieval are paramount—tended to adopt SA earlier and more consistently. In contrast, nursing-related publications that engage extensively with psychology, sociology, education, and information science, such as *Appetite* and *The Gerontologist*, showed slower and more incremental adoption. This pattern may reflect both disciplinary diversity and the presence of research traditions, including qualitative inquiry, that prioritize narrative coherence over rigid segmentation.

This pattern also aligns with editorial ecosystems. Several early-adopting titles follow international medical editing recommendations (e.g., ICMJE-linked practices and IMRAD-based article structures), which historically promoted clearer abstract guidance and length limits favoring structured presentation. Within such editorial contexts, SA formats function as standardized entry points for indexing and search, supporting efficient evidence retrieval for clinicians and researchers.

Functional Implications of SA Adoption

From a functional perspective, the move toward SA improves readability, allowing readers to identify aims, methods, results, and conclusions more rapidly, and enhances searchability by increasing consistent access points (headings and key terms) across abstracts. This efficiency is particularly valuable in clinical and health-related domains, where decisions hinge on swift appraisal of study design and outcomes. The present dataset shows that, once introduced, SA adoption tends to stabilize at high levels within journals whose communities benefit directly from such standardization.

Constraints and Exceptions

The persistence of UA in comprehensive review venues and the slower uptake in social/behavioral or food-related journals suggest that one-size-fits-all templates can be limiting when studies emphasize interpretive depth, narrative synthesis, or multi-perspective framing. In such contexts, authors may prefer flexible abstract structures that accommodate varied methodological and rhetorical needs without sacrificing clarity. The

heterogeneous trajectories observed here, especially the modest SA shares in *Appetite* and the UA continuity in *Annual Review of Nutrition*, show how scope and genre conventions shape abstract formatting.

Implications and Future Directions

Taken together, the results indicate that SA has become embedded in scholarly communication where clinical utility and transparent reporting are prioritized while remaining selectively adopted in domains with broader or more integrative orientations. For nursing and allied fields, the evidence points toward ongoing standardization with room for format innovations that better serve qualitative and comprehensive research, such as flexible, sectioned templates that retain signposting (e.g., background/objective/methods/findings/implications) whilst allowing narrative elements where appropriate. These observations align with the broader trajectory identified in the abstract: early uptake in clinically aligned journals, rapid expansion in the 2000s, and consolidation after 2010, alongside continued variation across disciplines.

In addition to these disciplinary and structural implications, the findings also carry secondary relevance for pedagogical contexts. Although not a central focus of this study, the documented patterns suggest that SA formats can serve as useful reference points in EAP settings by illustrating common organizational features of academic texts. Such use, however, must remain sensitive to disciplinary conventions, as overly rigid templates may constrain legitimate genre variation, particularly in fields in which narrative or interpretive approaches are integral. Framed in this way, the pedagogical implications complement, rather than overstate, the broader significance of SA adoption identified in this study.

Conclusion

This study provided a comprehensive account of the historical trajectory of structured abstract (SA) adoption in nursing-related disciplines over a 74-year period. The findings demonstrate a gradual yet significant shift toward structured abstract formats, beginning with their emergence in the 1990s, expanding rapidly in the 2000s, and becoming firmly established by the 2010s. This widespread adoption reflects broader developments in scholarly communication, including increasing expectations for clarity, transparency, and standardization driven by evidence-based practice, digital indexing, and open-science initiatives. SA formats have thus evolved from a stylistic preference into an integral component of research dissemination.

At the same time, the uneven adoption of SA formats across disciplines highlights ongoing tensions surrounding methodological diversity. Quantitative and clinically oriented fields have embraced structured formats as tools for improving precision and comparability, whereas qualitative and interdisciplinary domains often prioritize narrative flexibility. These differences point to the enduring need for adaptable SA templates that support clarity without constraining diverse epistemological traditions.

The implications of these findings extend modestly into pedagogical domains. SA can serve as useful reference models for teaching genre awareness, rhetorical organization, and academic literacy in EAP contexts. By making textual conventions more explicit, SA-focused instruction may assist multilingual learners and early-career researchers in navigating the demands of English-medium publishing. Approaches such as scaffolded rewriting tasks, corpus-informed analysis of abstract structures, and the selective use of digital tools offer promising directions for instructional practice.

Several limitations, however, should be acknowledged. First, the study focused exclusively on English-language journals indexed in Scopus and therefore does not capture adoption patterns in non-English publication contexts. Second, although the dataset spans 74 years, the availability and consistency of historical metadata may vary across journals and publication periods. Third, the study examined published abstracts rather than the perspectives of editors, reviewers, or authors. As a result, the explanations proposed here regarding disciplinary differences and adoption patterns should be viewed as interpretive rather than definitive. Future research could complement bibliometric approaches through analyses of editorial policies and interviews with key stakeholders.

Looking ahead, further research is needed to examine how authors and editors perceive SA formats, how structured approaches influence research accessibility, and how they may contribute to more equitable forms of scholarly communication. Emerging technologies, including automated SA generation tools, present both opportunities and challenges for future practice and pedagogy. Ultimately, the continued development of abstract formats must balance the pursuit of clarity and efficiency with the values of inclusivity and disciplinary diversity, ensuring that academic writing remains both standardized and adaptable in a rapidly evolving global research environment.

Bio Data

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