How to Write an Abstract
The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

If you are abstracting your own writing

When abstracting your own work it may be difficult to condense a piece of writing that you agonized over for weeks (or months, or even years) into a 250-word statement. There are some tricks that you could use to make it easier, however.

Reverse outlining:

This technique is commonly used when you are having trouble organizing your own writing. The process involves writing down the one main idea that is in each paragraph on a separate piece of paper. For the purposes of writing an abstract, try grouping the main ideas of each section of the paper into a single sentence. For a scientific paper, you may have sections titled Purpose, Methods, Results, and Discussion. Each one of these sections will be longer than one paragraph, but they are grouped around a central idea. Use reverse outlining to discover the several ideas in each section and then distill them into one statement.

Cut and paste:

To create a first draft of an abstract of your own work you can read through the entire paper and cut and paste sentences that particularly capture key passages. Isolate these sentences in a separate document and work on revising these disparate sentences into a unified paragraph.

Judi’s addition: If you have done your job on writing strong topic sentences, you should be able to write a first draft of an abstract just by cutting-and-pasting each of your topic sentences into a paragraph. Then revise to make sure it makes sense.