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## Fogler Library: Writing a Research Abstract Workshop

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Ally Hammond

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## Women in Science

**Date:** March 3, 2021

**Run Time:** 00:36:47

**Presenters:** Nancy Lewis, Ally Hammond

The abstract of your research paper is very important. Its purpose is not only to concisely summarize your work, but also to grab the reader's attention and convince them that your research is valuable and relevant. An unclear abstract can set the stage for confusion, whereas a polished abstract prepares the reader by telling them what to expect from your paper.

This workshop will show you how to perfect your abstract (with an emphasis on the UMaine Student Symposium's guidelines). We will begin with an overview of abstract-writing tips, followed by group activities for practice.

### About the Speaker:

Ally Hammond is a graduate student in the Master of Social Work program, where she is currently conducting research on the opioid epidemic. She also works at the Graduate School and has previously worked at the Office of Research Development.

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The following is an unedited, machine generated transcript. Alternatively, you may wish to activate your web browser's live captioning function.

### Begin Transcript

0:02

so again we're fortunate to have ali hammond with us on this writing a research

0:07

abstract session ali is a graduate student in social work um has been with us a couple years now

0:14

and works also in the graduate school has given this presentation before and it

0:20

was very well received folks got a lot out of it so aly thank you so much for doing it again and i'm

0:25

going to turn it over to you now hi everyone and thanks nancy for the

0:32

introduction um as nancy said i'm a social work student here at umaine

0:38

um i did do this workshop last year and um as you've all discovered there's pros

0:43

and cons to zoom so a pro is that there's a lot more of you right now than there were in the

0:48

in-person workshop last year because it's a lot easier to attend something like this over zoom but a con is that i'm a little

0:55

rusty at zoom workshops i've never done a full one over zoom so just bear with me if i struggle

1:01

to find my notes or anything like that so i'm going to start by sharing my

1:10

screen

1:18

okay and by the way if anybody has any questions while i'm presenting feel free

1:24

to just put them in the chat if i don't notice because i'm screen sharing then nancy

1:30

will notice them and feel free to interrupt me at any point

1:38

so these are the objectives that i have today so i basically just want you to

1:44

understand the purpose of an abstract um know the structure of it and how to identify the key components of one

1:50

um and to just have like a basic understanding of the steps in writing one so that by the end you'll feel comfortable actually writing your own

1:58

i know a lot of you are here so that you can feel more confident writing your abstract for the symposium

2:03

um and if you're not here for the symposium that's totally fine too because most of us are going to need to write abstracts for different reasons

2:10

at some point in our academic career and

2:18

so what is an abstract um before i actually put the definition on

2:24

i'm curious if anybody wants to kind of just speak up as to like what are your first thoughts like when you think about what

2:30

is an abstract

2:36

i normally kind of think of like an overview it's almost like a blurb for a uh more professional paper

2:43

that's a good way to put it basically like a blurb i like that

2:55

so this is the fancy official definition

3:00

um you know a summary of a research article thesis anything like that um which is used to

3:07

help the reader quickly ascertain the paper's purpose so um a lot of times if you're writing a

3:12

research paper or something like that and you're trying to find scholarly sources for it the first thing

3:18

you'll see is the abstract and if you guys are like me then you probably cited a paper or a journal article in

3:25

your paper after you only read the abstract because sometimes they're that good and it gives you like a really quick you

3:31

know bullet point information about what the researcher discovered so abstracts can be super useful

3:42

now when you write your abstract you want it to include some kind of

3:47

uh piece that involves each of the aspects of a research article so um i know that there's some

3:55

undergraduate students and some graduate students in the room so we're all at different levels of like how many

4:00

research articles we've read or even written um but these are the different components

4:05

of one of course the abstract the introduction which usually has some background information about the topic

4:12

sort of like a literature review there's a discussion of the methods so what the researcher did and how they

4:17

did it then they get into their results which is usually a lot of statistical

4:22

in-depth information and then a discussion explaining what those results mean and then a conclusion summarizing

4:28

everything and basically discussing what the implications of the results are

4:34

so you want to make sure when you write your abstract that a little bit of each of these is in it

4:48

so the function of the abstract of course it's useful to have a summary of any kind of book or paper or article

4:56

but the specific functions of an abstract are to provide an overview of your research so like i said somebody can

5:03

kind of just look at it and get a really good idea of what you did and understand that to highlight and

5:09

sell your work and to convince the reader to continue

5:14

or obtain the article because you know a lot of times you have to purchase journal articles

5:20

so in that case you want the abstract to be as interesting and gripping as possible but also if you're trying to advertise your

5:26

own work just to kind of show off what you've done for the purpose of getting a job or

5:32

anything like that or impressing judges at symposium and you know getting them engaged with your work

5:37

this is a really good way to do that is having a solid abstract

5:46

and also the abstract is usually the last part of the article that you write of course because if

5:51

you're going to include your implications and results and everything you have to already have those so you don't write the abstract

5:57

first

6:04

so what does an abstract do the motivation of your work

6:09

so why why did you decide to research this and this is where the the sort of like literature review

6:16

piece comes in you're kind of setting the tone you're describing why this is an important issue

6:22

the what you're stating the problem this would be a research question you know what are you researching what

6:28

are you wondering about that led you to do this work describing your method

6:33

so the how so how did you do your research which approach did you take um you know what materials did you use

6:43

your results so what is the answer to the question whether it was what you expected or not

6:50

and what are the implications so sometimes you might find that your research basically just you

6:56

found out that more research needs to be done or you found out that the hypothesis you had was incorrect

7:02

and you have to start over um regardless you want to discuss that

7:14

okay so based on those things that i just listed um oh wait a minute i forgot abstract

7:20

example one okay so i'm gonna send you guys the link to this abstract in the chat

7:28

and

7:34

how do i get back to the full screen stop share

7:47

all right so if you don't want to follow along with this one you don't have to but i just thought that it might be

7:53

helpful so i'm going to read it anyway so

7:59

abstract example one and this is a real abstract that i pulled from a random source i think it

8:04

was actually written for like a high school project so the southwest shrub juniperous

8:10

communism juniper berry has a significant medicinal value in native american culture

8:15

one of the popular uses of juniper berries aside from its detoxifying action is its potential to repel insects

8:22

however this use of juniper berries has not been proven scientifically so here we have the

8:30

the background and this one is just very simple and straightforward just saying a little bit about juniper

8:35

berries and why this person is studying it and then it hasn't been proven scientifically so it's like oh okay

8:42

that's why this study is being done because this use hasn't been proven scientifically

8:47

so it aims to demonstrate the efficacy of these berries as an insect repellent compared to a commercial insect

8:53

repellent that's your research question to do this we developed an insect

8:58

repellent from juniper berry essential oil obtained to through steam distillation so they're telling us how they did it

9:05

and you know providing some extra information about the exact amounts of

9:10

water and grams of fresh berries we don't necessarily have to go into all of that but that's your methods

9:17

and then after they finish describing their methods they say after testing and comparing the results

9:23

the commercial insect repellent significantly showed that it is a better insect repellent compared to the j

9:28

commercial diluted essential oil so they basically tell us well their hypothesis was wrong

9:34

it didn't work as well although to be fair they don't specifically say that they thought it would work better they're just looking at the difference

9:42

but maybe this isn't what they expected doesn't matter you know you just report it because you're still contributing to the field you're still

9:48

contributing to the literature and then they say however the essential oil also has

9:54

an insect repellent potential so this abstract does hit on all of those

10:03

points that we were talking about it tells us why they did the study it tells us what

10:09

the research question is it describes the method highlights the results

10:14

and proposes implications but with this particular example i did take issue with just the last

10:22

sentence because it says however the essential oil also has an insect repellent potential

10:28

and i think that kind of leaves the reader wondering why so it just has potential like what do

10:35

you mean by that were the results pretty close to the commercial one do you just

10:40

want it to have an insect repellent potential is is more research needed to find that

10:46

out so that's the only real weakness that i personally saw with this abstract and that's something to kind of think about

10:53

when you go to write yours while the abstract is meant to make the reader

10:58

you know interested and to make them want to read your article or look at your project it's not

11:03

supposed to be a teaser trailer where it's like a big secret what the result is you're actually supposed to

11:09

spoil the movie you know what i mean you want to tell them exactly what you found out and the reason why

11:16

they want to read more about it is to find out exactly what you meant by that

11:23

okay so the reason why i sent you guys that one

11:30

first is because

11:38

i just put another link in the chat to two more abstract examples and what i want to do

11:45

if zoom will allow us to is to put you guys into random breakout rooms so that you can

11:50

kind of do the same thing that i just did with two other abstracts and to basically

11:56

take some time to read them and just see what do you like about them what do you not like

12:02

and is anything missing in them so both of the abstracts have strengths

12:08

and weaknesses and i'm just kind of curious for what you guys think and we'll come back after probably

12:16

10 to 12 minutes to discuss it together as a group and see what you think all right

12:22

so thank you guys for participating in that i hope it was at least a little bit helpful um and

12:29

before we discuss abstracts two and three i just wanted to bring up something that chelsea

12:34

brought up uh before she went into the breakout room that i found really helpful and that was that in the first abstract

12:40

example we looked at um the author had said something about how juniper berries are used in



12:46

native culture and uh you know so on one hand it's it's pretty

12:51

reductive and offensive because there's many many many native cultures on the planet

12:58

um but also it's just not really good form so if you're a researcher you need to know the background of your topic

13:04

and you wouldn't say native cultures because that doesn't make sense you would actually know specifically which

13:10

native culture or cultures used the berries so um i just wanted to bring that up

13:17

because i appreciated that and that's probably an edit that i personally would make if i were to use

13:22

that abstract again or that's advice that i would want to give the author as well because it kind of makes them come across as

13:28

though they don't really know about their topic so with that said and thanks again

13:34

chelsea does anybody have some preliminary thoughts on abstract example two and also i'll share

13:42

my screen so that we can look at it while we talk about it

13:50

i think you guys should all be able to see that now and anyone feel free to either speak up

13:56

or um you can also put comments in the chat if you prefer that

14:02

hi hi yeah first off it's three paragraphs long which is already way too

14:08

long actually that's true it is very long

14:24

yeah just that going along that line there's a lot of extraneous stuff that could be taken out it seems like sorry to not be

14:31

more specific no that's totally fine well actually i was curious so i just did a word count

14:37

on it and it's apparently it's 252 words i would have thought that it was more and i think the symposium abstract limit

14:45

is 250. um but there's another reason why it

14:50

might seem so long and i'm wondering if anybody uh picked up on this specific thing

14:59

well because it was kind of rambling i had a hard time figuring out what is exactly the purpose of this

15:07

study and what was their research and what other research because they talk about like in the

15:12

second paragraph my research findings and then the next section sentence says further the research reflects

15:20

i don't know if they're talking about their research study or are they talking about the accident literature and you know

15:26

they use a lot of uh lingo here that needs to be defined

15:32

because i don't know what a salmon tribe is is that what you call a group of salmon or is

15:37

that like a tribe that depends on salmon and you know it seemed like very unclear

15:43

about you know they're talking about quantities of fish in different areas they're talking about policy

15:49

it's like pickling that's a very good point they are pretty vague and um

15:57

it is you should be saying something like previous research says x y and z and then um our study or

16:04

the current study aims to blah blah um

16:10

and so well so first does anyone else have any kind of other things that they want to add

16:21

okay so um the the main thing about this abstract that

16:26

really jumped out to me is that they literally did not even describe what they did at all

16:34

and i thought that it was you know they're probably just really like into this topic and they're really

16:40

happy about their research and they started writing about it and you know that's great for a first draft um but

16:47

you have to describe what you did what was your research what was your method

16:52

and you know if they had kept you know maybe like half of this introductory

16:58

background and then added a couple of sentences about their method it could be a pretty solid abstract

17:05

because even at the end where they say my research reflects that current management favors the bering sea so

17:11

they have their implications in there and they have the background they have the beginning and the end but they don't

17:17

have that key part because the abstract is supposed to describe the research that you did

17:22

so when they talk about um you know the different ways like the famine tribes um are excluded from the salmon

17:30

management but they're showing that commercial fishermen have been um kept at bay so to speak um on how they

17:38

are allowed to fish that's not considered you know like the the what's happening kind of thing it's

17:44

not like the comparison of what the topic's about so which sentence are you talking about

17:51

yeah congressionally mandated fishery council um a number of commercial official organizations you're

17:58

talking about how they catch commercial crown fish like that right there yes so commercially if you

18:04

have you know like our lobstermen for example going out catching lobster and just a comparison something to say um

18:11

because when they say alaskan salmon tribes later um they're actually talking about your native like tribes that live up there that

18:18

depend on the fish so i think that their information just isn't coming across

18:23

right i get it because i've done research on this right but when you're when you're a

18:29

native in alaska you don't have limits like a commercial fisherman would the and the styles of fishing is totally

18:35

different and that yeah that's true it's so this brings up a couple of things that first

18:41

if you're someone in the field it's going to be a lot easier to be like oh i kind of think i understand like like what they did and sometimes it is

18:49

okay to write your abstract in such a way that only people in your field will understand it

18:54

um a lot of times for research articles you'll you might want to write two different abstracts one that is more

19:00

general for people for a lay person someone outside of the field and one that's for someone who understands your field

19:07

and that being said though yeah what for me i just kind of read it

19:12

and i was like i don't know i don't know what they actually did

19:17

you know did they look at lots of different sources and analyze data did they run some kind of

19:23

experiment for me it was hard to tell so and that also brings up the importance of peer review

19:30

that you should always have a couple of different people read your abstract and be like so do you understand what i did or do you kind of get it

19:35

um and it helps you catch things that maybe you wouldn't catch just reading it by yourself so thank you for that that's a good

19:42

point so for abstract example three

19:51

does anybody have some thoughts right off the bat

19:57

good or bad

20:08

again there's a lot of vagueness um particularly in [Music]

20:13

what exactly they were trying to do um it seems like they were implying it are

20:19

they trying to look at quality of websites in terms of

20:24

design are they uh trying to look at websites in terms of how effective they are in convincing

20:32

people to get screened are they looking at them in terms of can they raise money and ethically or whatever i

20:39

don't know what it is they're actually trying to study here and

20:45

or what their tool is they talk about these components but they're very vague about what those

20:52

components are i don't i don't know what's been measured here that's a good point they talk about

20:58

you know why they're doing it like this is the focus we're looking at these websites because

21:03

of this problem but we don't really know like what exactly their method was and

21:09

while you are limited on the amount of words you have in your abstract i do think that there are ways to describe that a little bit more

21:15

thoroughly without going over your word count it does kind of leave a lot to be desired in terms of like so what did

21:21

what did you do

21:27

anyone else have any kind of thoughts on this one

21:39

um they included their methods and their data in this example which usually is not done in abstracts

21:46

or at least the ones that i have read that's a fair point it's

21:54

it's hard because i have seen it done both ways and it's kind of it's i wouldn't say

22:00

that like you can't include all of your results and or or not but i think it depends on what you're trying

22:06

to do um the one about juniper berries i thought went like a little bit

22:11

too much into detail about the methods for example but ultimately as long as you're hitting

22:17

all of those parts and you're answering all those questions and you're not going over the word count

22:23

it's not a horrible thing i think you should ask yourself if i was just a disinterested audience

22:30

member what would i want to know um because it is supposed to be compelling

22:37

and interesting so yeah i think i think that's definitely a fair thing to consider and to bring up

22:46

ali we have a question in the chat does the inclusion of methods depend on the discipline

22:54

i think that no matter what your discipline is you want to say something about how you did your research um i think

23:01

that the field is going to determine very much how you describe that so in a little bit

23:08

we're gonna talk about sort of like a basic formula for writing an abstract and this will make more sense but there might be a difference between

23:14

the approach of your study and the method um just from my own experience i have seen a lot more

23:21

discussion of of methods and abstracts for um things like biological sciences than

23:27

i have for social sciences but no basically like no matter what you

23:33

want to say something about how you did your project even if it's like say an art project

23:39

you would want to say i used this kind of material to make this kind of sculpture or um painting or whatever and

23:46

that's your methods but you have to say something about how you did it

23:52

i hope that answers the question

24:04

i saw something come up in the chat but yeah it doesn't let me see it when i'm screen sharing

24:10

the um the person that put the question and said yes that answered yes thanks okay good to

24:16

know and so one last thought that i had on this abstract is i thought the last sentence these

24:23

results lend ideas for future research on such topics as well as ideas to better the current state of the top

24:29

breast cancer websites i thought that was pretty vague um because when you talk about the

24:35

implications that you get from your results that's kind of the most important part of your project um that's that's really

24:43

the take home like okay so you did this project and you got these results but why should i care

24:49

and your job as the researcher is to know why people should care so they could have said i don't know

24:55

maybe one of those ideas to better the current state of top breast cancer websites

25:00

um and to not just say it lends ideas for future research but to say

25:05

more research could be done on blank and it doesn't have to be super long but

25:11

i think just something a little bit more specific would have been preferable

25:17

we have another question abby um reading this i was wondering how to present methods or results

25:24

or overall abstract format based on what we already did before the symposium and are continuing

25:31

to do after the symposium so research that is coming up before the

25:38

symposium but there is still going to be more research after the symposium how would that

25:43

affect the the abstract oh so okay so how to describe your

25:48

methods when you you're not done yet at the time of submitting

25:54

that's a good point because the timing of symposium is a little unfortunate for a lot of people's projects

26:00

um i think in that case what i would do is is to describe what i have done already

26:05

and and then to in the next sentence say what you're going to do um and it would basically just be the

26:12

same thing but you're putting it in future tense and that's okay because the symposium judges know that maybe you haven't

26:18

gotten through the whole project um to better answer the question though

26:24

i would want to see like the specific circumstance or abstract um but generally speaking you like you'd

26:31

have some idea of what you're going to do so i would just put that right in the

26:36

abstract okay so if no one has any other thoughts

26:43

on those two examples i will move on to the slideshow again

26:56

all right

27:02

so and everyone can see the slideshow again right okay so a simple formula for writing an

27:10

abstract um i think that this should work for every field every field you know it might produce a different

27:16

looking abstract but this is definitely a good place to start for everybody and what i'm going to do is to use that

27:23

first abstract example about the juniper berries to parse out what each one of these

27:28

components is based on what that person wrote

27:35

so you always want to start by introducing your topic and in that abstract this is the section

27:42

which would be considered the introduction to the topic so they just had a couple of sentences

27:49

describing the background

27:55

you want to state the problem so you're building on what you just said and you're basically

28:02

saying what your research question is what exactly you're studying and i think this is the the part of that

28:09

abstract in which they did that so this study aims to demonstrate the efficacy of these berries

28:15

for as an insect repellent compared to a commercial one and when i say research question i don't

28:20

necessarily mean that it has to be in a question form but this it's basically the question that you're asking yourself as you go

28:27

into this project so if you were to flip this around to make it a research question

28:32

you could easily do that does a juniper berry derived essential oil work to repel insects at least as effectively

28:38

as a commercial insect repellent so if you can easily turn it into a question and it's the focus of your work it's

28:45

your research question so then you want to summarize the holes

28:52



in the current research and don't let this one throw you off because this will look very different in

28:58

every field sometimes it's really obvious what that is sometimes it's a little less clear

29:03

but for example in the juniper berry abstract this was how they did that the use of

29:08

these berries has not been proven scientifically and it was that simple

29:17

also this part actually came before the previous one in this person's abstract and that's fine because they still had

29:24

all of the components um and in this case i think it's good that this part came before the last part because it flows

29:32

well so as long as you're as long as you're using all of these components and it flows well it doesn't matter the

29:38

order i wouldn't put the introduction in the last sentence but you know there can be a little bit

29:43

of variation so then you want to explain your

29:50

approach and the way that they did that was we developed an insect repellent from

29:56

juniper berry essential oil obtained through steam distillation so this is this is what they did it's

30:02

how they tackled the research question then you want to explain the method this

30:08

is usually more specific and uh this is where they kind of went

30:14

into the specific measurements and you know exactly what they did this is usually the i'm going to use the academic term very

30:21

sciencey part of the abstract

30:28

and uh when it comes to the approach versus the method just keep in mind that the approach

30:34

is where you would explain um what you did whereas the methods is how you did

30:39

it um also in the approach if you used a specific theory to guide your research that's

30:45

where you would put that um and if you're in a field that is theory based you'll know exactly what i mean by that

30:51

if you're not that is fine and then state the impact

30:59

so this is the part of the abstract in which they stated the impact and then kind of insinuated vaguely that

31:07

the essential oil also has an insect repellent potential so again it's not the strongest

31:12

implications but that's where they did that so the results and your impact

31:22

so that's basically the formula and um you want to have one or two sentences

31:28

for each of these sections and when you do that you're probably gonna hit that 250 word limit

31:34

but i also wanted to just note that if you feel constrained by the idea of

31:41

only having one or two sentences for any of these bullet points that's fine i would encourage you to just kind

31:47

of write all of the words that you're thinking right now vomit out all of those thoughts for each of these

31:53

sections and then whittle it down after to 250 words if that's your writing style i know that

32:00

that's how i write i prefer to write a lot and then if there's a word limit to cut down from there because that's a lot

32:06

easier than kind of constraining yourself as you are writing so don't stress about the

32:12

word count it's always easy to go back and simplify things and cut them down and

32:18

all of that good stuff

32:25

so that is basically all i had in terms of the presentation and i hope that that

32:31

last part was helpful as a sort of basic guide to writing your abstract and also i'll make these slides

32:36

available after this workshop so that you guys can go back and refer to that

32:42

um and let's see what time it is 6 49 so um

32:49

we have until 7 and what i wanted to do is see if people actually had abstracts

32:57

already that they wanted to peer review um if you don't that is totally fine if

33:03

you do we could either do that through breakout rooms or we could do it as one big

33:08

group and alternative sorry alternatively if you're not interested in peer review

33:14

then it's totally okay to leave the meeting as well so let me know

33:20

what you want to do you could even put it in the chat just want to have a

33:26

feel for if anybody did bring an abstract to be reviewed

33:42

and thank you all for attending by the way we appreciate it

33:50

allie can i ask a clarifying question really quick absolutely you were saying if your um

33:56

field is theory based or if your work is theory based where did you put that into the

34:01

structure of the abstract i missed that so it would be most likely right before

34:06

you kind of go into your methods okay so what field are you in if you don't mind me asking

34:12

anthropology okay so yes so that probably would apply to you um i

34:19

don't know any like specific anthropology theories but i know like so my bachelor's is in psych  
so i might say

34:26

uh we based this research um method off of a positive psychology perspective and

34:33

then you would go on to say um you know we we had people report the positive traits

34:40

that they felt they had and then we measured their increases in self-esteem over time after  
that and so the latter

34:46

part would be the methods whereas the positive psychology part would be the approach yeah  
okay so you situate

34:53

yourself at it you situate yourself in the paradigm that you're working with

34:59

right sure okay all right that makes sense thanks absolutely and for people that

35:05

are in more um like biological life sciences and and that sort of thing you might not

35:11

really feel that you have like an approach that's separate from your methods there might not  
be like a theory per se

35:17

that you're working with and that's totally fine as long as you describe like what it is that you did

35:22

um you're definitely satisfying like those those components

35:39

and so i see that nancy put a link to an evaluation in the chat

35:44

i would super appreciate any any thoughts that you guys have because like i said this is my first like

35:50

zoom workshop um so i'm happy for any like good or bad thoughts that you had on it or what i

35:56

could do to improve next time it doesn't look like anybody has

36:01

abstracts that they want peer-reviewed however if you have questions for me um

36:06

feel free to email me any questions that you have about your abstracts about the workshop or anything and i'll

36:13

definitely be um i'll send the link to nancy to send out to all of you uh for the slides so that

36:19

you can refer to those again that's great and ali i want to thank you

36:24

very much for being willing to do that this evening for us um i know it was helpful to a lot of

36:29

people absolutely thanks for having me and this is the recording will be shared on the on the

36:35

library's workshop page probably midday tomorrow it takes a little bit for the files to

36:40

get processed all right well have a good evening

36:46

Everybody

*The University of Maine in Orono is the flagship campus of the University of Maine System, where efforts toward racial equity are ongoing, as is the commitment to facing a complicated and not always just institutional history. The University recognizes that it is located on Marsh Island in the homeland of the Penobscot nation, where issues of water and its territorial rights, and encroachment upon sacred sites, are ongoing. Penobscot homeland is connected to the other Wabanaki Tribal Nations — the Passamaquoddy, Maliseet, and Micmac — through kinship, alliances, and diplomacy. The university also recognizes that the Penobscot Nation and the other Wabanaki Tribal Nations are distinct, sovereign, legal and political entities with their own powers of self-governance and self-determination.*