Tip Sheet 17. Abstracts

An abstract condenses yet accurately represents an entire document. Abstracts are a form of technical communication, allowing readers to act. Type or "mode" of an abstract depends on the perspective within which it is written. Forms of abstracts vary, depending on content and media (Table 1 below).

Abstracts have purposes that relate to the rhetorical situation:

For the community, an abstract codifies knowledge succinctly into a standardized form used in a variety of archives that become an accessible body of knowledge.

For writers, an abstract represents a decision point because it is an opportunity either to draw the reader into the message or to encourage them to decide not to read. Writers use abstracts as an appeal to the logic of the reader.

For readers, an abstract often is the point of access to read the article either through an electronic or bibliographic search service or through the journal archive itself.

For the message, an abstract not only describes, it also prioritizes and focuses the information conveyed.

To write an abstract, an author needs to know well the information to be condensed. Next, the writer investigates the outlet and the outlet's preference for type of abstract because both the readership and the editor make decisions based on the abstract. Just as readers may not decide to read an article based on the abstract, editors may decide not to publish an article based on a poorly written abstract. Consequently, write concisely. Write the working abstract early in the draft of an article and revise the abstract after the draft is completed. Write abstracts at one sitting; revise similarly. Sometimes, having visuals at hand can help make writing precise. Check that the abstract and the title contain key terms so that access can be assured.

- Know the outlet and the type of abstract it uses and requires: besides the content of the message, the needs of the editor and the access of the reader predominate.
- Write precisely in one sitting. Meet the requirements for numbers of words set by the outlet. Count all words.
- Use generic names for substances and scientific names for organisms.
- Concisely state theories, terminology, interpretations, or evaluations; define new terms, abbreviations, and symbols.
- Clearly state research results and why they contribute to new knowledge.

The ANSI (American National Standards Institute) standard for writing abstracts has been in place since 1997 and is reviewed periodically, the latest in 2010. The standard specifies length, style, and types of abstracts with examples provided in the appendices to the standard. You can download a free .pdf file or print a copy of ANSI Standard Z39.14-1997 at http://www.niso.org/kst/reports/standards?step=2&gid=None&project_key%3Austring%3Aiso-8859-1=5944461cb4a1e365ad1688ec6f6c199c9d90ee71

- Written in 1996, reviewed and reaffirmed in 1997, 2002, and 2010.
- Defines types of abstracts.
- Suggests abstract lengths at about 300 words for lengthy monographs down to about 30 words for editorials or response letters. States that words in the title should not be repeated in the abstract for efficient accessibility. Include no visuals.
- Contains excellent examples of types of abstracts.
- Distinguishes in a glossary between defined types of abstracts and related terms like annotation, extract, summary, and synoptic.

Table 1: Abstracts

Type (Mode)	Definition (An abstract that…)	Form	Discipline
Informative (To inform)	Follows prescribed headings to objectively represent all of a research document or presentation. Condenses the original by paraphrasing sections.	Outlet-specified form	Science, Social Science, etc. See outlet guidelines. May include Objectives or Purposes, Methods, Results, and Conclusions in an order particular to the outlet.
--Structured	Follows a standardized form that features headings used in journal articles by discipline.	IMRAD CONSORT	Introduction-Methods-Results-Discussion: Science Consolidated Standards of Reporting Trials: Medicine, clinical trials
Indicative (To indicate)	Describes purpose, background, scope, approaches, and arguments in a document.	Descriptive; one paragraph (unstructured)	Liberal arts; editorials, essays, opinions, books, bibliographies. Business: technical reports, lists, directories. Science and Liberal Arts: conference proceedings.
--Slanted	Highlights a particular portion or perspective of the document for a particular audience.	Descriptive	
--Critical	Comments on the significance of the content in a document or on the style of a presentation.	Descriptive, Uncommon	Written by disciplinary specialist abstractor, not the author , typically to evaluate the work
Indicative-Informative ("II")	Combines indicative content with an informative conclusion.	Descriptive	Conference programs often use this abstract to describe presentations; take care that this abstract does not constitute first publication.