

INFS 324: INDEXING AND ABSTRACTING

Session 10– ABSTRACTING II

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Session Overview

This Session is a continuation of the discussion on abstracting. I will be telling you about the types of abstracts; the skills needed for abstracting; and the general procedure for abstracting.

Session Objectives

At the end of the session, you will:

- Know about the different types of abstracts.
- Learn what the different types of abstracts are used for.
- Understand the skills required to write a good abstract.
- Learn the general procedure for abstracting.
- Be able to write a sample abstract.

Session Outline

The key topics to be covered in the session are:

- Topic 1: Types of Abstracts
- Topic Two: Writing an Abstract
- Topic Three: General procedure in Writing an Abstract

Reading List



Topic One:

TYPES OF ABSTRACTS

Types of Abstracts

There are different forms of abstracts.

Examples include:

Informative abstracts,

Indicative abstracts,

Informative/Indicative abstracts,

Critical abstracts,

Structured abstracts,

Types of Abstracts(Cont.)

Author abstracts,
Telegraphic abstracts,
Highlight abstracts, etc.

However, I will look at those that are
of most importance to information
professionals.

Informative Abstracts

As much as possible Informative abstracts provide qualitative and quantitative information provided in the original document in a clear and concise manner.

Informative abstracts satisfy two main objectives namely

- as an aid to the evaluation of the document for its relevance for the purpose of selection or rejection, and
- as a replacement to the document if only superficial knowledge of the content of the document is required

Informative Abstracts(Cont.)

They cover four essential aspects of the document:

- Objective and scope of the work
- Methodology used in the work
- Results of the work
- Conclusion of the work

Uses

They are normally used for documents that report new findings

For Example:

- scientific journals,
- technical bulletins,
- monographs and sometimes
- conference proceedings.

Indicative Abstracts

Indicative abstracts are different from Informative abstracts in the sense that they only indicate what is contained in an article or document.

It may be said that they discuss the article that discusses the topic.

They do not report the actual content of the document.

Uses

They are used for discussion and review articles.

- In some cases they may be used for
conference proceedings;
reports without conclusions;
essays; and
bibliographies.

Informative / Indicative Abstracts

In practice these are more common than the purely informative or purely indicative abstract.

- The two together mean that parts of the abstracts are written informatively while other parts are written indicatively.
- Those parts of the document considered to be of great importance are written informatively
- Those of minor significance are treated indicatively.

Uses

Informative/Indicative abstracts may be used for:

- Papers or documents that report original results.
- They may also be used for literature reviews.

Critical Abstracts

These are referred to also as **unusual abstracts**.

This is because they express the abstractor's opinion.

- A well produced critical abstract will describe the contents of a document
- Then proceed to evaluate the work and its presentation in terms
 - scope and depth
 - adequacy of research methodology.
 - intended audience.
 - contribution to the development of knowledge.

Structured Abstracts

These were designed to bring improvements in abstracting to help professionals cope with the deluge of information they are faced with in their work.

- One major concern for improving on abstracting has been the issue of inaccuracy in abstracts.
- For example Pitkin and others (1999), in a research had discovered that 18% to 68% of abstracts in leading general medical journals had data that were either inconsistent or were not in the text of the articles.
- Structured abstracts have therefore, been designed to ensure ease of abstracting and to avoid issues of inaccuracies by allowing the abstractor to fill in the blanks under a set form of sub-headings for segments of the document.

Structured Abstracts(Cont.)

For example:

- Objective;
- Background;
- Methodology;
- Results;
- Conclusions;
- Applications; etc.

Structured Abstracts(Cont.)

Another set of sub-headings may be
'purpose',
'approach',
'findings',
'practical implications' etc.

Structured abstracts additionally have been designed to facilitate searching by both human beings and computers.

Indeed this type of abstract has come up as one of the steps geared towards making abstracts more suitable for a digital environment. There have been concerns that the structure, form and content of abstracts need to change to encompass the networked environment in which they are now used.

Uses

- Structured abstracts are widely used in the
 - medical,
 - clinical and
 - psychology fields.
- Some social science and business publishers also make use of structured abstracts.

Telegraphic Abstracts

These are abstracts that use key words from the document without being faithful to syntactic integrity. Telegraphic abstracts read like a telegram

For example:

“Millions onions grown in California.”

Classification of Abstracts

Abstracts may also be classified by the purpose for which they are being written.

Thus they may be

- discipline-oriented;
- mission-oriented; or
- slanted.

Discipline-oriented

When the abstract is written for a specific area of knowledge, it is called discipline-oriented.

For example

geography,
psychology etc.

Mission-oriented

These are written to support application activities that may or may not be inter-disciplinary in nature.

- They are defined in terms of an assignment rather than a subject area.
- Mission-oriented abstracts are aimed at a specific operation with a specific mission;

For example :

Experiments to increase the yield of a specific crop.

Slanted Abstracts

These are a variation of the mission-oriented abstract.

- It focuses on a selected section of the document's matter.

For example,

a document that discusses diseases of domestic animals including

dogs,

cats,

chicken etc.

may have only the part concerning dogs abstracted.

Topic Two:

WRITING AN ABSTRACT

Skills required for Abstracting

The basic skills needed by an abstractor include:

- A good standard of literacy especially the ability to write clearly and concisely
- Detailed knowledge of the subject area of the material being abstracted
- An awareness of the patterns of text structures in the materials being abstracted
- An awareness of the kinds of people who will use the abstract and the environment of information access generally
- The ability to work methodically and accurately

Common Rules for Abstracting

The process for writing an abstract is not a rigid one that follows specific laid down rules

There are however, standards, guidelines and practical, commonsense procedures that are very useful to follow. A few of the most common rules follows.

- Include the results but leave out how they were obtained
- Leave out examples, definitions, and explanations
- Don't include graphs or tables
- Don't include references

Common Rules for Abstracting(Cont.)

- Omit what the author judges to be less important
- Leave out the obvious
- Leave out arguments that are marginal
- Don't repeat what is included in the definition of a concept
- Don't say it twice
- Avoid fancy rhetoric
- Define the main concept if it is needed
- If an acronym is not common then explain it
- Use standard terminology

Topic Three:

GENERAL PROCEDURE FOR WRITING AN ABSTRACT

Step I

- The first step in writing an abstract is to accurately and fully record the reference.
- Inaccurate reference will make the abstract fail to facilitate access to the original document.
- If the reference is wrong or inadequate users of the abstract may give up and turn to other sources or may be burdened with additional work.

Step I(Cont.)

The elements to be included in the reference are fairly standardized.

These are:

title,
author,
publication source,
language, and
foreign language (if any)

- If there has been a translation the source of translation should be provided.

Step I (Cont.)

- Other information that may be provided include:
- author affiliation – an author's organization often is of interest to the information seeker because it helps in judging the author;
- descriptive notes (for example available only in microfiche or electronic format);
- sources for obtaining the document; and
- price.

Step I(Cont.)

- It is generally accepted that the reference section comes before the body (the actual abstract)
- Because users can decide if they want to read further.
- In other words they choose on the basis of the title.
- The order of presentation, however, depends on the choice of the individual abstracting agency.

Step II

This involves the analysis of the subject content of the document in much the same way as subject analysis is done in indexing.

However, in indexing analysis involves the identification of key concepts which lead to a list of words that point to the contents of a document,

But in abstracting the objective is to produce a narrative of the document's content in the Abstractor's own words.

Step II(Cont.)

The Abstractor focuses on a number of overall key indicators like the:

- objective

- scope of the document,

- methodology,

- results and

- conclusions.

Step III

This is the stage at which the abstract proper is written.

- By this stage the abstractor would have:
 - notes on the key aspects of the document,
 - a mental picture of the contents and
 - concepts of the document.
- These must be constructed into a short narrative.
- The narrative should be in natural language
- It is generally believed that most people who would use the abstract have not seen the document before.

Step IV

This is the last stage in the creation of the abstract.

- The stage is characterized by the arrangement of the abstract.
- The arrangement of the abstract may be
 - alphabetical by title of the document;
 - alphabetical by name of the author of the document;
 - alphabetical by subject descriptors;
 - it may be classified;
 - it may dictionary.
- The most common arrangement, however, is alphabetical by title.

Step IV(Cont.)

Almost all abstracts will need indexes to support them
Especially when the arrangement of the abstract follows a classified order.

- The abstract should be signed by the abstractor.
- This gives credibility and responsibility for the abstract on the part of the abstractor.
- The signature is often only the initials of the abstractor.
- The full name of the abstractor will appear elsewhere in the abstract publication.

For informative abstracts, it is advised that the abstractor should

- use the active voice
- use past tense
- discuss the research (subject matter of the document).

For indicative abstracts the abstractor should

- use the passive voice
- use the present tense
- discuss the article that discusses the research (subject matter of the document)

Dos and Don'ts

Generally, however, in writing an abstract the following dos and don'ts should be taken into consideration.

- Thus in writing an abstract the abstractor should
- Scan the document purposely for key facts,
- Slant the abstract to the audience
- Tell what was found,
- Tell why the work was done
- Say how the work was done.

Dos and Don'ts(Cont.)

- Be informative but brief.
- Be concise and unambiguous.
- Use short sentences
- Use direct statements
- Use abbreviations sparingly.
- Avoid the use of unusual words or phrases
- Cite bibliographical data completely

Dos and Don'ts(Cont.)

On the other hand the abstractor should not:

- Change the meaning of the original document
- Comment on or interpret the document
- Mention earlier or future work
- Use uncommon or rare phraseology
- Waste words by stating the obvious
- Say the same thing in two ways
- Overuse synonyms.

THANK YOU

