

# INFS 324: INDEXING AND ABSTRACTING

## SESSION 9 – ABSTRACTING I

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# Session Overview

Just like indexing, abstracting is the process of representing the subject content of knowledge records with the purpose of leading an information seeker to appropriate information. Abstracting however, differs from indexing because of the provision in part of the actual information contained in the document or record of knowledge. In this session, I will tell you what abstracts are and their similarities to other document surrogates. I will discuss also their characteristics, purpose and uses, and finally types of materials that may be abstracted.

# Session Objectives

At the end of the session, you will be able to:

- Define abstracts and distinguish them from other document surrogates.
- Identify their major characteristics.
- Describe their purpose and uses.
- Determine which types of materials may be abstracted.

# Session Outline

The key topics to be covered in the session are as follows:

- Topic 1: Definition and Distinction of Abstracts from Other Documents
- Topic Two: Purpose and Uses of Abstracts
- Topic Three: Characteristics of Abstracts
- Topic Four: Types of Materials that may be Abstracted
- Factors that may Determine which Material may be Abstracted

# Reading List



Topic One:

# **DEFINITION AND DISTINCTION OF ABSTRACTS FROM OTHER DOCUMENT SURROGATES**

# Definition of an Abstract

Abstracting, like indexing, is the process of representing the subject content of knowledge records in order to lead an information seeker to appropriate information.

- However, abstracting differs from indexing because of the provision in part of the actual information contained in the document or record of knowledge.

# Definition of an Abstract (Cont.)

The process of creating abstracts is what is called abstracting. Abstracting may be defined as the procedure for representing the contents of records and documents in order to facilitate the retrieval of documents.

Abstracts have severally been defined as:

- “an abbreviated accurate representation of the contents of a document without added interpretation or criticism and without distinction” (Cleverdon and Cleverdon, 2013).
- “a concise and accurate representation of the contents of a document in a style similar to that of the original document” (.)



# Definition of an Abstract (Cont.)

- Abstracts are usually expected to cover all the main points raised in the original document
- They are to follow the style and arrangement of the parent document.
- They are non-critical because the main objective of the abstract is to report the contents of the original document and not to comment on it.

# Distinction from other Documents

There are other document surrogates that may be distinguished from abstracts. These are:

- Annotations
- Abridgement
- Extract
- Summary
- Executive Summary

# Annotations

An annotation is a note that is added to the title or other bibliographic information of a document.

It may be in the form of a :

Comment, or

Explanation, or

Description of the document.

# Abridgement

This is usually a reduction of the original document that necessarily eliminates secondary points.

If you read any of

Shakespeare's plays or

Charles Dickens' novels

when you were in basic school then you must have read the abridged versions of those works.

# Extract

It is a selection of one or more parts of a document to represent the whole document.

Usually it comprises a sentence or two showing the

- results,

- conclusions or

- recommendations of a study.

It is often shorter than an abstract, and does not require much effort to produce.

# Summary (Cont.)

This is very often difficult to distinguish from an abstract. It is a statement of the essential findings and conclusions of a document.

A summary may appear at the beginning of a document or at the end of the document.

- When it appears at the beginning, it serves the purpose of orientation and preparation of the reader for exploring the whole document.
- When it appears at the end, the summary is intended to complete the orientation of the reader and to give him the opportunity to recollect the significant ideas that he had just read.

# Summary (Cont.)

A summary differs from an abstract in the sense that the former assumes that the reader will have the opportunity to read the original document whereas the abstract makes no such assumptions.

That is why the abstract must be

- self- contained and
- accurate and
- must also be in the style of the original document.

# Executive Summary

An Executive Summary provides a preview of the main points covered in a report.

- It may be found attached to the report or it may be separated from the main report.
- It is usually very straight forward and non-technical.
- It describes in detail what is to be expected in the main report.
- A good Executive Summary provides readers an overview of the report without necessarily having to read the whole report.



Topic Two:

# PURPOSE AND USES OF ABSTRACTS

# Purpose and Functions of Abstracts

The main purpose of an abstract is to facilitate retrieval of information.

- It does so by cutting down on the time and effort that the user will spend to get the original information from the mass of information that is available.

## **Abstracts serve three main functions**

- To disseminate information
- To select information
- To retrieve information.

# Some Major Uses of Abstracts

- They promote current awareness.
  - Abstracts do that by repackaging information contained in original documents in order to facilitate dissemination
- They save reading time.
  - They are able to do that because they are much smaller in size compared to the original document yet they carry as much information as the user requires
- They organize documents in a more convenient and less expensive way because they are easier to handle and cheaper than published books

# Some Major Uses of Abstracts(Cont.)

- Abstracts serve as an aid to the user in evaluating the contents of the documents in order to determine its relevance.
- They serve as vital tools in document selection and information gathering; therefore, they help to avoid duplication.
- They lead also to translation of the language of the original document to other languages and thereby facilitating greater access to information

# Some Major Uses of Abstracts(Cont.)

- Abstracts facilitate rapid scanning of the contents of the document such that the user does not need to read the entire document.
- They help in literature searching by mapping scope and key themes
- They improve indexing efficiency and effectiveness
- They aid in the preparation of literature reviews and bibliographies on specific topics

# Some Major Uses of Abstracts(Cont.)

- Knowledge of abstracting skills is also beneficial to students in a sense that it will ensure effective note taking.
- In a working environment it helps
  - lawyers,
  - business executives,
  - doctors, etc
- To absorb committee papers, digest current literature easily and analyze reports.

# Some Major Uses of Abstracts(Cont.)

More importantly abstracts are particularly significant for us in developing countries because they serve as invaluable sources of information in the face of peculiar problems that we have in accessing the mass of information that is generated worldwide.

These peculiar problems include

- Finance – where funds to acquire the necessary materials in large quantities for everyone to have easy access is not available; and lack of funds to acquire I C T facilities to enhance access to information
- Staffing problems and
- Training problems.

Topic Three:

# **CHARACTERISTICS OF ABSTRACTS**



# Major Characteristics

A good abstract must display three main characteristics

- **Accuracy:** As far as practicable, all errors must be avoided.
- **Brevity:** They must be shorter than the document from which they are derived. Brevity saves the user's time and lowers the cost of production of the abstract.
- **Clarity:** This means that it must be clearly written and all sorts of ambiguities avoided.

# Additional Characteristics

## Abstracts

- must be self-contained and must make good reading by themselves or in conjunction with the title without necessarily reading the original document.
- should be objective without containing any critique or interpretation or evaluation.
- must be high in information content and should place emphasis on reporting new facts.

# Length of an Abstract

Abstracts may also be characterized by their length.

- On this, there are two schools of thought.
- One believing that a document of about a page or two should be abstracted in not more than 200 words
- while a larger document should not exceed 500 words.
- The other school believes that there should be no rule on the length of the abstract because the length would necessarily be affected by a number of factors such as:

# Length of an Abstract (Cont.)

- The length of item to be abstracted itself would affect the abstract, in the sense that
  - a longer document will attract a longer abstract and
  - a shorter document would have a shorter abstract.
- The complexity of the subject matter of the item to be abstracted will also affect the length of the abstract.
- The diversity of the subject matter of the document or item of information.

For example,

the abstract of the proceedings of a conference may be long if the conference covered a wide range of topics.

On the other hand if only one topic was discussed the abstract would be shorter.

# Length of an Abstract (Cont.)

- The importance of the item to the organization preparing the abstract would also affect the length.

For example

If the information centre of an industrial organization is preparing an abstract on the organization's report, the abstract will naturally be longer than if the same organization is preparing one on another organization's report.

# Length of an Abstract (Cont.)

- Printing costs may also affect the length of the abstract.
  - A longer abstract may cost more in terms of typesetting and stationery used.
- The purpose of the abstract will also determine its length
  - For Example:
    - if it is to be used to assess a document for retrieval purposes, it might need to be longer in order to provide enough access points.

# Length of an Abstract (Cont.)

Accessibility of the subject matter of the document can also affect the length.

- Accessibility here refers to physical and intellectual accessibility.

**Physical accessibility** refers to the limited distribution of the document e.g.

University of Ghana publications would only be found in the University bookshop.

**Intellectual accessibility** refers to the document being in an unknown language (or lesser known language).

Obviously only few people can have access to the document if it is in an unknown language.

Commercial abstracting services would necessarily produce longer abstracts of such documents in order to provide enough information to the user.

Topic Four:

# **TYPES OF MATERIALS THAT MAY BE ABSTRACTED**



# Journals

Any record of information, no matter its form, purpose or source may be abstracted provided it is worth preserving. However, there are a number of general categories of materials which should attract abstracting. These are:

## **Journals**

- Majority of abstracting is done on journals.
- The reason is that journals are the source of publication of most primary literature.
- Usually all the papers in the journal would be abstracted.
- Papers in journals may be theoretical papers, research papers, technical papers or speculative essays.
- Generally, letters to the editor, discussions, review articles, communications and editorials may not be abstracted unless they contain significant information

# Technical Reports

These are very important items for abstracting because of their peculiar nature:

- Sometimes they are a page or couple of pages and are very difficult to handle and access.
- They can easily get lost or pages may be defaced.
- Abstracting gives them permanence and ease of accessibility.

# Dissertations

These include long essays and theses. However, there is controversy over whether they should be abstracted or not.

- One school of thought believes that dissertations are academic works which do not serve the interest of the general public.
- The other school of thought believes that they can be and sometimes are very important sources of information.

# Books and Monographs

- If a book is on a single subject then a single abstract would be created.
- If it discusses a number of subjects, then an abstract would be prepared for each subject discussed in the book.

# Conferences and symposia proceedings

- These are also served by abstracts

# Reviews

- They may also be abstracted although they may not be done extensively because reviews themselves are a summary of what a document is about.

# Patent Specifications

Abstracts on patents are important to workers who are concerned with patents.

- These include :
  - patent lawyers,
  - business executives,
  - industrial R&D personnel and
  - inventors

Topic Five:

# **FACTORS THAT DETERMINE WHICH MATERIAL MAY BE ABSTRACTED**



# Factors that determine materials to be abstracted

There are a number of factors that determine which material may be abstracted.

- These are
  - economic constraints,
  - significance of the material,
  - subject interest of the users of the abstract and
  - source of publication.

# Economic Constraints

This means cost in terms of time and production

- if it will take too much time to create or write the abstract of a particular item, the abstractor may decide not to do it
- it may cost too much in terms of money and resources.

# Significance of the material

Preference is given to materials of high priority.

- Letters to the editor,
- Items of communication,
- Notes,
- Editorials, etc

May not be abstracted unless they contain relevant information.

# Source of Publication

- Items from reputable publishers are more likely to be abstracted
- than those from relatively unknown publishers.

# Subject Interest of Users of the Abstract

- Depending on the intended audience of the abstract a particular item may or may not be abstracted.
- If a particular subject is of interest to users the abstractor has no option but to create an abstract on the material otherwise there is no point writing one.

# THANK YOU

