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An Introduction to Writing (Good) Abstracts [Video]

Transcript

“Writing is one art form that can be practiced almost anywhere at almost anytime normally you can not paint in the office or sculpture in the classroom or play piano on a plane or the trumpet on the train but given some paper and a writing instrument one can write in any of these places. What emerges may not always be a work of art but it could be at the very least we can introduce clarity, precision, and grace into the most ordinary of our written communications.”

I also believe that abstracting can be a work of art. And what do I mean by that maybe it's a little to haughty but you'll find if you talk to professors, people who do a lot of abstracting, they abstract when they get flashes of inspiration. They get ideas for projects and they'll take their hands to the keyboard and they'll type away and they will churn out an abstract long before the paper is even written. Now that's not what you'll find in a guidebook for being the regular rules of writing an abstract but it's what a lot of people do. You'll get an idea for a paper that you want to present at a conference or write and you will generate that abstract first and so in this way it can be an art form. And I want to encourage you to think about it like that, think of your abstract writing as though it can be an art and we want to elevate it. It's challenging to take an idea and to quickly compact it into a nutshell and disseminate it. It's a challenge. It's not an impossible feat but it's a challenge non-the less. What exactly are we

talking about? What is an abstract?

Although the terms summary and abstract are often taken as synonymous, abstracts are not always summaries and they're not always linear in description. An abstract will highlight the major points but it will also omit some parts of the document and it will also reduce some of them disproportionately. A summary is meant to give readers a nutshell idea of the paper, a snapshot, an outline, a proportioned rendition of what the original work is. You'll also find that abstracts are typically about 150 words to about 250 words more or less so you know that much. They're typically pretty brief, but they can be longer. They also tend to follow a very set pattern.

So much is this the case that PhD Comics, if you haven't heard of this yet, has made fun of them. It's one of these insert word here type of situations. Why? Because they're very typical they have the same set pattern. So I've taken the liberty of filling this out a bit. And here's what I've come up with. This paper presents a novel method for interpolating the panopticon, using science. The helium was measured to be 10+-10 miles Results show blah blah blah. Okay that's the language of abstracts and we can make fun of it because it's just insert word here. Now I could give you this PhD Comics mad lib and send you on your way, but that wouldn't be very effective and it certainly wouldn't be intellectually ethical would it now? And the joke would stop here because this is big business. A lot of you, you know our careers depend on it, can we write these things? Can we get our work out there? Simply put, abstracts are abstractions. They are extractions from the document. They are brief, they are concise, they are complete, but they are ultimately the product of information reductionism or condensation. So no matter what the style of abstract that you are using you will essentially be doing this.

You're ability to write an abstract will showcase your ability to identify the major points over the minor points. It will showcase that you have the ability to logically and coherently explain the argument presented in the content of an article, be that article your work or someone else's. You'll notice that abstract writing is like most writing you encounter; it's like most writing you've ever done and the reason why is because your method for doing it will be largely determined by your audience, which includes, but is not limited to, researchers, journal editors, conference organizers and attendees, foundations, readers of journal articles, posters, grant applications, or formal reports, and the list goes on. Lots of people read abstracts. They're the ones you need to convince because they're the ones that hold the power. They're the ones that decide if you're work gets published; they're the ones that decide if you get in to the conference. Right? Are you fitting the needs of the conference enough? They help determine for the attendees of these conferences whether or not they want to come to your presentation or someone else's.

So with us being in the mental image of the conference hotel let's think about the elevator. I think of the abstract as being a written form of your elevator speech. So this idea, this was an idea that was generated in the new economy era of the Silicon Valley, and it has sort of been appropriated by academics when we're at these conferences. And the idea is that you're topic, your dissertation, your thesis, your project, whatever, you should be able to convey it precisely enough so that in the time it takes you to get from the lobby to the penthouse you can explain what it is.

So this brings me to the most common abstract styles that you're going to encounter. The indicative or descriptive abstracts, now these are also called the topical abstracts. They next ones are the informative or summary abstracts, those are a bit longer. And the third, these are what I call hybrid abstracts because they defy conventions for informative or descriptive abstracts. But for now it's important for you to know that there are many other types of abstracts out there. I want you to realize that there are critical abstracts. These are the abstracts that maybe you write with the evaluation in them; they are the abstracts you write

when you are preparing for prelims. They have a summary but there is more criticism. Then you have findings-oriented abstracts, highlight abstracts, modular abstracts, purpose-oriented abstracts, reader-oriented abstracts, statistical abstracts so on and so forth. But we'll turn our attention to the abstracts that you are most likely to encounter and write.

The first of which is descriptive, topical, or indicative abstract. A descriptive abstract is going to indicate or simply describe your project or whatever it is in the work that you are abstracting. It makes no judgments about the work. There is no evaluations, no results, conclusions, or recommendations. Now it does include key words that are found in the text, and it may include the purpose, methods, and scope of the work. In other words its essentially a bare bones, this is what I did, kind of document. Some people would like to consider it an outline of the work rather than a summary, but its not always linear its contents. You'll find that descriptive abstracts are always very short; they have about a hundred words or less.

Now the more common type of abstract is the informative or summary abstract. This is more like a brief version of the contents of a paper because it abstracts major sections and points within the paper. If it's an abstract for a scientific journal or a technical paper, it's appropriate to use IMRAD: introduction, methods, results, and discussion. A good informative abstract should mirror the work in its emphasis and ratio. So, for example, if the original includes a very large discussion section but a not so large methods section, what will the summary have? It will have a very large discussion section but not so large of a methods section. And the typical length of these things is about 200-700 words, but if you find yourself getting upwards of 700 words, even 300 and upward, you want to break it down so that it can be into paragraphs. Remember it is for ease of reading; people need to know what you're talking about, and a whole bunch of words on a page are just hard to look at.

Those indicative, they really only have purpose, scope and methodology. Whereas these informative, they're going to have purpose scope and methodology but its also going to include at minimum results, and conclusions and recommendations at most. So let's experience the difference. So the difference is you'll see that this is all the same writing as over here but this has included this other information, this shows the results and conclusions as an addendum, as an addition. So there is this third kind of abstract the hybrid abstract and like I said early hybrid abstracts they sort of defy classification as purely either informative or purely descriptive. You'll run into this situation of the hybrid abstract when the venue or the audience you are writing for has specific style requirements: for example, when you're publisher has preferences, or the granting institution has requirements, or there are guidelines given to you by the conference organizers, or even your professors instructions. So you'll see that there is going to be variance.

So what are some guidelines for generally? When you have abstracts, at the end of the day, this is what they want. They want it to be brief; make the abstract as informative as the nature of the document will permit so that readers can decide quickly and accurately, key words, whether they need to read the entire document. It also comes down to accessibility and usefulness as in two you will see all that stuff, and then it comes down to conciseness, exactness of language, and echoing the tone and emphasis of the original document.

Now key words, key words will always be included in any really good abstract. They're used to search databases so if you're paper that you are writing is on gender or some is chemical sort of engineering term, fill in the blank, you want to include that as your key word. So these are terms that databases use to file and retrieve abstracts and they are what are used for people like use when we're going and finding articles, it's what we'll enter in.

So we've spent a lot of time so far going over the types of abstracts. We've given a look at a few examples, we've talked about some general guidelines, and we've gone into some

specifics. But what we really haven't gotten into is how do we write these things? What are the stages in abstract writing? How do we get this work done? These are two that I have come up with that I have been able to track down one is from the writing center provides and this other one is generated by Edward Cremmins author of the art of abstracting and this is what he has come up with so four stages: first stage is to focus on the basic features of the text being abstracted, that's if you've already gotten it written. You want to classify the form and content of the materials. You might find that writing a reverse outline may help you see what you have written a little better, so you'll want to look at that, and if that's unclear I examine that and kind talk about that with you later. The idea with this stage is that you'll determine the type of abstract that you need to write; that's if you haven't been told already what type of abstract you need to churn out. Now moving on to stage two, that's the identification of relevant information. This involves the searching for cue and function words and phrases structural headings and topic sentences. The idea is that you'll identify a representative amount of relevant information for extraction. Extract into abstraction. And that involves organizing and writing the extracted relevant information into a standard format. And the idea here is that you are going to end up with a concise, yet unified, unedited abstract.

Fourth stage is refinement, which is essentially the editing or review of the abstract by you the original writer, or somebody else. This other one is what we outline for you at the writing center. If stages are not really your cup of tea and that's just basically saying if it doesn't suit you, you can follow this step. First we ask you to be very familiar with the document that you are going to be abstracting. If its your work ideally you know about it, you know what you've written, but if its somebody else's stuff, read it a few times, get a sense of what it is. Then highlight the major information, and in a lot of disciplines that goes back to that IMRAD and then you want to compile that highlighted information into a single paragraph. It can be dirty; it doesn't have to have so many transitions. Then you want to write a rough draft of that abstract using that compiled highlighted information and don't look back at that original document. The idea is that you understand it well enough that you can give the elevator speech so to speak, and be sure to paraphrase. If you are abstracting somebody else's work don't use their words. You don't want to enter into the dark world of academic disintegrity, so and then you want to check if you didn't leave out anything important or add anything not included in the document. You want to delete any unnecessary words, make it more concise, how can you make your sentences clearer? Basically you're looking for clarity, and coherence, and brevity.

And the big question then is, do you have a killer abstract or are you an abstract killer? So that's tough. You've got to evaluate your work right? And it's hard. It's hard to know if you've written a good abstract. It's tough, it takes other people looking at it and also a little bit of knowledge and hopefully this presentation has given you a sense of what you can expect from a good abstract. But basically you can also come to this, this checklist. This is one that we've produced here at the writing center. You can ask yourself, 'have I included the subject, scope, purpose, and methods, and in the case of an informative abstract have I included the results, recommendations, significance, so on and so forth?' This isn't heuristic, okay folks? This isn't cut and dry, this is how you're going to get a good abstract. This is a way of generating thought and giving yourself a sense of how these things are evaluated, so that will hopefully shed some light on this very confusing topic.
