

A Scrutiny of the Abstract, II*

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Abstract

A partial biography of the writer is given. The inadequate abstract is discussed. What should be covered by an abstract is considered. The importance of the abstract is described. Dictionary definitions of “abstract” are quoted. At the conclusion a revised abstract is presented.

For many years I have been annoyed by the inadequate abstract. This became acute while I was serving a term as editor of the *Bulletin* of The American Association of Petroleum Geologists. In addition to returning manuscripts to authors or rewriting of abstracts, I also took 30 minutes in which to lower my ire by writing, “A Scrutiny of the Abstract.” This little squib has had a fantastic distribution. If only one of my scientific outpourings would do as well! Now the editorial board of the Association has requested a revision. This is it.

The inadequate abstract is illustrated at the top of the page. The passive voice is positively screaming at the reader! It is an outline, with each item in the outline expanded into a sentence. The reader is told what the paper is about, but not what it contributes. Such abstracts are merely overgrown titles. They are produced by writers who are either (1) beginners, (2) lazy, or (3) have not written the paper yet.

To many writers the preparation of an abstract is an unwanted chore required at the last minute by an editor or insisted upon even before the paper has been written by a deadline-bedeveled program chairman. However, in terms of market reached, the abstract is *the most important part of the paper*. For every indi-

vidual who reads or listens to your entire paper, from 10 to 500 will read the abstract.

If you are presenting a paper before a learned society, the abstract alone may appear in a preconvention issue of the society journal as well as in the convention program; it may also be run by trade journals. The abstract which accompanies a published paper will most certainly reappear in abstract journals in various languages, and perhaps in company internal circulars as well. It is much better to please than to antagonize this great audience. Papers written for oral presentation should be *completed prior to the deadline for the abstract*, so that the abstract can be prepared from the written paper and not from raw ideas gestating in the writer’s mind.

My dictionary describes an abstract as “a summary of a statement, document, speech, etc...” and that which *concentrates in itself the essential information* of a paper or article. The definition I prefer has been set in italics. May all writers learn the art (it is not easy) of preparing an abstract containing the *essential information* in their compositions. With this goal in mind, I append an abstract that should be an improvement over the one appearing at the beginning of this discussion.

Abstract

The abstract is of utmost importance, for it is read by 10 to 500 times more people than hear or read the entire article. It should not be a mere recital of the subjects covered. Expressions such as “is discussed” and “is described” should never be included! The abstract should be a condensation and concentration of the essential information in the paper.

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