Writing abstracts

There are three types of abstract: descriptive, informative and critical. The qualities of a good abstract are reviewed and some of the common errors are given. Practical experience is based around some examples of abstracts which are reviewed to see if they follow the guidelines and avoid the common errors.

Three types of abstract

Descriptive abstracts

- Short - usually less than 100 words.
- Includes:
  - purpose of the work (objectives)
  - method used
  - scope of the work
- Doesn’t include:
  - results, conclusions and recommendations

Reader will probably have to read the document to see if it is relevant.

Informative abstracts

- Fairly short - from 200 words to a page or more.
- Includes:
  - purpose of the work (objectives)
  - method used
  - scope of the work
  - results
  - conclusions and recommendations

Communicates the content of the document, so the reader mayn’t need to read the document.

Critical abstracts

- Similar to a review – but shorter.

Qualities of a good informative abstract

Concise
- Usually less than 250 words

Structured
- The abstract has an introduction-body-conclusion structure.
- In engineering, this is sometimes seen as a situation-problem-solution-evaluation paradigm.

Reports the paper’s structure
- Reports the purpose/objectives, method, findings, conclusions of the paper.

Connected
- Provides logical connections between the parts of the abstract.

Adds nothing new
- Summarizes the paper - doesn’t add any new material or analysis.
Don’t’s

There are a number of very common errors made in writing descriptive and informative abstracts:

Repeat the title
Don’t repeat the title of the paper as it is already in the title (and the more you repeat the title, the more boring it gets and the more space it wastes).

Don’t refer to things outside the abstract
The title and abstract should function as a self-contained unit - eg they might be used in an indexing and abstracting service like Compendex or Science Citation Index.

Don’t include references to literature (eg Bloggs, 1999), figures and tables in the paper.

Don’t … use obscure abbreviations and acronyms
You may define abbreviations and acronyms in your text - but the reader will have to read your paper to find out what your abstract is about.

Some abbreviations are OK - eg “A.D.” and “B.C.E.” and acronyms like “Nato” - but these are little used in computing.

Do you know what “LFG” and “WAM” mean?