

WRITING AN ABSTRACT

UWF Writing Lab

-Excerpted from The Little Rhetoric and Handbook
(2nd. ed.), Edward P.J. Corbett
Scott, Foresman and Company, 1977

The abstract gives the reader a quick overview of the whole report. Because the abstract is not only an important part of a report but also an increasingly important form of writing aside from the report (especially in information-retrieval systems), it will be discussed at some length here.

Writing abstracts is something of an art, for it demands two skills: skill in reading and skill in writing. Unlike many other kinds of writing, the abstract does not require the writer to find something to say. Instead, the writer takes what he or someone else has written and reproduces the substance of the text in a considerably shortened version. However, that kind of abbreviation of the text is not as easy as it may appear. One must be a skillful enough writer to set forth those important points in a coherent form and in a limited number of words.

An abstract is in some ways like a sentence outline). A sentence outline sets forth the major points (the roman-numeral divisions) of an essay or article and at least the first level of subordinate points (the capital-letter subdivisions). The difference between an outline and an abstract is that while the outline is presented in the form of a listing of points, the abstract is written out in a sequence of sentences. But if you are skillful enough to be able to construct a sentence outline of the main parts of a piece of extended prose, you should be able to pick out the main points that should go into the abstract.

Another way to approach the task of writing an abstract is to develop the skill of picking out the topic sentences of the paragraphs in the body of an essay. A collection of all the topic sentences might make your abstract longer than it needs to be and might obscure the relationships and relative importance of the sentences, so you might have to combine two or three topic sentences into a broader generalization and provide connecting links between sentences.

Think of the process of abstracting as a distilling of the essence of a longer piece of prose. You need enough sentences to cover all the major points of the essay, but you have to boil away the supporting details of the longer version. What you are left with is a “concentrate” of the longer essay.

There are two kinds of abstracts: descriptive and informative. The descriptive abstract, which is usually quite short, merely indicates what topics or areas are covered in the longer text. The informative abstract usually gives

readers the main points or ideas of the longer text. The difference between the two can be illustrated in the following sentences:

Descriptive

The major forms of literature produced in England in each of the three consecutive centuries are discussed in this article.

Informative

In England, drama was the prevailing form of literature in the seventeenth century, the prose essay was the chief contribution of the eighteenth century, and the novel was the dominant form in the nineteenth century.

Although you will find descriptive abstracts in some reports, you are more likely to find--especially in lengthy reports--informative abstracts, because the reader wants to get a preview of the main ideas presented in the report rather than merely an indication of the areas covered. As you will discover for yourself, the informative abstract is much harder to write than the descriptive abstract.

In preparing to write an abstract, either of a text you wrote or of a text someone else wrote, you might find these suggestions helpful:

1. Read the text all the way through to get an overall view of it.
2. In a second reading of the text, make a checkmark in the margin opposite sentences or paragraphs that make what you think are major points. (Aids that can guide you in picking out major ideas in a text: table of contents, introduction or preface, heading and subheadings in the text itself, summaries of sections, the conclusion of the whole text, italicized or boxed sentences and paragraphs.)
3. After marking the main points, try making at least a rough outline of the text.
4. From an outline, decide how many points, and which ones, you should include in your abstract. (Sometimes a word limit is set for the abstract (e.g. 150 words or less). If so, that limit will help you decide how many points and which ones, you can include in your abstract.
5. Write the first draft of the abstract. (At this stage, don't worry about how many words you are using. Just get something down on paper.)
6. Revise and trim the first draft, if necessary. (At this stage, see if you can supply linkages between the sentences to make the abstract read smoothly.)

7. Write the final draft of the abstract.

If you were to follow these suggestions in preparing to write an abstract of a chapter entitled “Special Kinds of Writing Assignments,” for instance, you might write descriptive and informative abstracts like these:

Descriptive Abstract

The three kinds of special writing assignments dealt with in this chapter are writing about literature, writing an essay examination, and writing reports. Sets of questions are proposed to help students generate ideas for an analysis, interpretation, or evaluation of fiction, drama, and poetry. Practical advice is given about how to write satisfactory answers in an essay examination. The special considerations and formats of informative and persuasive reports are discussed, and special attention is paid to the writing of descriptive and informative abstracts.

Informative Abstract

In writing about literature, the student is involved in one or more of these acts: analyzing, interpreting, or evaluating. In an analysis of a literary text, the two general questions to be answered are (1) what is the work about? and (2) how is the work put together? In an interpretation of literary text, the two general questions to be answered are (1) what did the author mean? and (2) what did the work mean to you? In an evaluation of a literary text, the two general questions to be answered are (1) how well did the author accomplish what he or she set out to do? and (2) was the work worth your time and attention? Sets of more particular questions can lead the student to more specific answers to these general questions.

In writing answers to essay-examination questions, the student should (1) read the questions carefully, (2) address the questions head-on, (3) plan the answers, (4) develop answers adequately, and (5) avoid padding answers. Examples of answers to an examination question in American history illustrate adequate and inadequate answers.

In writing both informative and persuasive reports, the student should give special consideration to the completeness, accuracy, intelligibility, readability, and objectivity of the report. The twelve parts of a typical formal report are (1) the letter of transmittal, (2) the title page, (3) the table of contents, (4) the table of illustrations, tables, charts, and graphs, (5) the abstract, (6) the introduction, (7) the body of the report, (8) the list of conclusions, (9) the list of recommendations, (10) the appendices, (11) the list of references, and (12) the index. Because of the importance of the abstract, both as a separate form and as a part of the report, procedures for writing descriptive and informative abstracts of this chapter of the book are presented.