Writing Informative Abstracts

The following information is excerpted from http://www.olemiss.edu/depts/writing_center/grabstract.html.

Informative Abstracts

- Communicate specific information from the report, article, or paper.
- Include the purpose, methods, and scope of the report, article, or paper.
- Provide the report, article, or paper's results, conclusions, and recommendations.
- Are short -- from a paragraph to a page or two, depending upon the length of the original work being abstracted. Usually informative abstracts are 10% or less of the length of the original piece.
- Allow readers to decide whether they want to read the report, article, or paper.

Informative Abstracts provide information from every major section in the body of the report.

- Usually about 10 percent of the length of the full report but no more than 3 to 4 pages.
- Summarizes the key information from each of the main sections of the report, and proportionately so a 3-page section of a 10-page report ought to take up about 30 percent of the informative abstract
- Phrases information in a very dense, compact way
- Sentences are longer than normal and are crammed with information
- Includes key statistical detail

Informative Abstracts omit...

- Introductory explanation (unless that is the focus of the main body of the report)
- Definitions and other background information (if they are not the major focus of the report)
- Citations for source borrowings
- Descriptive-abstract phrasing such as: "This report presents conclusions and recommendations from a survey done on grammar-checking software."
- Instead, the informative abstract presents the details of those conclusions and recommendations.
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The informative abstract is not an introduction to the subject matter of the report—and it is not an introduction.

Essential elements of the abstract are:

- **Background:** A simple opening sentence or two placing the work in context.
- **Aims:** One or two sentences giving the purpose of the work.
- **Method(s):** One or two sentences explaining what was done. (Described at length only if it is unusual)
- **Results:** One or two sentences indicating the main findings. (Absolutely essential)
- **Conclusions:** One sentence giving the most important consequence of the work. (Telling what the results mean).

Questions an Abstract Answers

- Why did you do this study or project?
- What did you do, and how?
- What did you find?
- What do your findings mean?
- If the paper is about a new method or apparatus the last two questions might be changed to
  - What are the advantages (of the method or apparatus)?
  - How well does it work?

An abstract should include the few things you would like your reader to remember long after the details of your paper may be forgotten.

Qualities of a Good Abstract

- Well developed paragraphs are unified, coherent, concise, and able to stand alone
- Uses an introduction/body/conclusion structure which presents the article, paper, or report's purpose, results, conclusions, and recommendations in that order
- Follows strictly the chronology of the article, paper, or report
- Provides logical connections (or transitions) between the information included
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- Adds no new information, but simply summarizes the report
- Is understandable to a wide audience
- Oftentimes uses passive verbs to downplay the author and emphasize the information

Steps to Writing Effective Abstracts

Reread the article, paper, or report with the goal of abstracting in mind. Look specifically for these main parts of the article, paper, or report: purpose, methods, scope, results, conclusions, and recommendation. If you're writing an abstract about another person's article, paper, or report, the introduction and the summary are good places to begin. These areas generally cover what the article emphasizes. After you've finished rereading the article, paper, or report, write a rough draft without looking back at what you're abstracting. **Don't merely copy key sentences** from the article, paper, or report: you'll put in too much or too little information. Don't rely on the way material was phrased in the article, paper, or report: **summarize information in a new way**.