

Abstract

Definition of genre

An abstract is a brief digest that summarizes the essential information of an article. Abstracts often help readers decide whether to read the article itself; a poorly written abstract may induce a reader to overlook an important article.

Types of abstracts

Abstracts can be informational (declarative) or descriptive. Both types emphasize results rather than process.

- Informational/declarative abstracts include information about conclusions and results, as well as purpose, methods, and scope.

Example: “Sendak demonstrates that North Carolina apple growers are relying increasingly on agrotourism” (declarative).

- Descriptive abstracts typically exclude concrete information about conclusions and results.

Example: “Sendak discusses the results of his survey of North Carolina apple growers” (descriptive).

Of the two examples above, which do you think would do a better job helping you decide whether to read the entire article?

Actions to take

- Be direct, concise, and specific. Make every word count.
- Eliminate nonessential information.
- Determine an appropriate length given both the original source and the audience for the abstract. Some journals place strict word limits on abstracts. A doctoral dissertation might have a 250-word abstract, whereas a short article might need only a 25-word abstract.

Helpful links

<http://www.rilm.org/abstinfo.html>

Detailed advice on writing abstracts, from the publishers of the Repertoire International de Litterature Musicale (RILM). The tutorial provides numerous examples of strong and weak

abstracts, with clear explanations of what works and what doesn't. The examples are field specific (musicology), but the principles apply across fields. (NB: The Writing Studio does not share RILM's fondness for the passive voice.)

<http://uwc.tamu.edu/handouts/writing/wrabstract.html>

A brief guide to abstract-writing from Texas A & M University's Writing Center.