OUTLINES OF MODERN LIBRARIANSHIP

Abstracting and indexing

JENNIFER E ROWLEY

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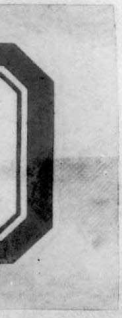

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INTRODUCTION

Document analysis makes a significant contribution to communication and information flow. There are two major document analysis tools: abstracts and indexes. Students need to understand both how to produce these, and why and where they are appropriate. Some students of librarianship and information science will find themselves employed as abstractors and indexers. Many others will be engaged in the evaluation, acquisition and exploitation of information tools that rely upon abstracts and indexes, such as printed abstracting and indexing publications and computerized databases. An appreciation of the decisions necessary in the compilation of abstracts and indexes is essential not only to the intending indexer but also to the information staff devoted to information work.

Abstracting and indexing data is a vital component in the communication link between the originator of information and its ultimate consumer. Abstracts and indexes organize the literature so that a specialist can identify documents of interest more easily. This is particularly important in scientific and technical fields of endeavour, but is also becoming increasingly recognized as essential in the social sciences, economics and cultural pursuits.

This work is not a comprehensive account of all abstracting and indexing practice; space dictates that it be selective. Instead, the author has attempted to present a readable account of some of the key practices in the twin fields of abstracting and indexing. Central practices are highlighted and should lay a firm foundation for more advanced studies. This book also attempts to lay the groundwork for abstracting and indexing practice. A trainee indexer or abstractor must practice and refine these techniques, but this book should prepare the student for such practice. Practice is paramount. Only such theory as is necessary to an intelligent application of techniques is covered, and other texts should be consulted for further theoretical treatment. Thus, many of the more sophisticated techniques with limited potential for application are omitted. Space has rather been devoted to a more thorough treatment of a relatively limited number of techniques.

The approach taken in the book should appeal to students of library

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and information science. Others engaged in organizing and exploiting information, such as managers, computer scientists, and administrators should also find something of interest.

The work assumes a knowledge of basic cataloguing and classification practices in its readers. Although this background is not essential, a more integrated understanding of the organization of knowledge and information retrieval will be achieved in the presence of this knowledge. Familiarity with the description of documents, the formulation of author headings, simple alphabetical subject headings and the major classification schemes are useful prerequisites.

An attempt has been made to achieve an integrated view of manual and computerized information retrieval systems and abstracting products. For example, the chapter on post-coordinate indexing, Chapter 6, considers Peek-a-boo cards alongside computer storage media. Likewise, Chapter 9 mentions both printed abstracting and indexing journals and on-line information retrieval systems. This would seem to be a satisfactory way of treating both manual and computerized systems and avoiding repetition. Both computerized and manual information retrieval systems have a contribution to make to the organization of knowledge. Computerized systems have advanced considerably in recent years, and have become much more widespread. In due course, they can be expected to make further inroads into the province of manual systems, but manual systems are not redundant yet. Further, automatic abstracting has a long way to travel before it can challenge the human abstractor.

Necessarily, many ideas are omitted from this work, but then this is perhaps its strength. Scant attention has been paid to evaluation and the needs of users. Little in general has been said about the retrieval side of the systems; document analysis has stolen the limelight. Omission does not imply insignificance.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to acknowledge her debt to the authors of the literature that has gone before, and also to the various persons and organizations that have kindly permitted the reproduction of their work. Lastly, my sincere thanks go to Peter and Shula – Peter for his patience, and to Shula for sleeping so soundly whilst I completed this manuscript.

Chapter 1

ABSTRACTS

Abstracts are an important component of many primary and secondary publications, current awareness services and computerized databases. This chapter opens the topic of abstracts and abstracting by discussing the various kinds of abstracts and their functions.

What is an abstract?

The following simple definition of the term 'abstract' will serve as a useful starting point: 'An abstract is a concise and accurate representation of the contents of a document, in a style similar to that of the original document.' (The term has undergone some evolution over the past thirty years, and different abstracting styles and approaches are appropriate in different circumstances and with different documents and users.)

An abstract covers all the main points made in the original document, and usually follows the style and arrangement of the parent document. Abstracts, unless specified otherwise, are non-critical. Absence of criticism is a necessary prerequisite of a style which aims to report, but not comment upon, the content of the original. Abstracts are self-contained and complete. They assume only that the reader has some knowledge of the subject, but not that he will necessarily have the opportunity to peruse the original.

We will pause for a moment to distinguish between an abstract and various other document abridgements and surrogates. Although all surrogates facilitate communication, each type of surrogate is designed to serve a unique purpose, and the boundary between the various types of document surrogates is not always clearly defined. Terms are not always used consistently or in accordance with the descriptions given below. However, the subsequent discussion should at least serve to illustrate the variety of approaches to the preparation of a document abridgement or surrogate.

Let us start with the term 'annotation'. An annotation is a note added to the title and/or other bibliographic information of a document by way of comment or explanation. In a cataloguing context the term is often used to refer to the notes which are appended to the

standard bibliographic description of a document, as part of that document's entry in a catalogue. Such an annotation may include comments on any element of the bibliographic description, including, for example, previous publication history, special features of physical format, subject content, earlier titles and related works. Annotations found in bibliographies may be less stylized and, although they also may cover any of the previously mentioned details, are more likely to dwell on the subject content. In this sense, an annotation in a bibliography is closer to an abstract. Indeed, much of Chapter 2 is equally applicable to the preparation of good annotations. Nevertheless, an annotation is basically an expansion of the information given in the bibliographic citation. Its objectives are more limited than those of an abstract, and consequently, in general, an annotation will be briefer than an abstract.

Another means of document representation is the extract. An extract is one or more portions of a document selected to represent the whole document. Plainly, in many documents sections that can be regarded as truly representative of the flavour of the original are absent or difficult to identify. The contents of an extract will often be culled from the results, conclusions or recommendations, ie the concluding segments, of the document. Due to the very nature of these portions they are unlikely to be a balanced representation of the whole document, but will tend to highlight certain significant points made in the document.

A third type of document abridgement is the summary. The distinction between a summary and an abstract is often not clearly indicated. Strictly, a summary is a restatement within a document of the salient findings and conclusions of the document. A summary at the end of a document is intended to complete the orientation of the reader and to present him with the significant ideas to remember, whereas a summary at the beginning of a document is intended to orientate the reader in preparation for exploring the entire document, or, perhaps, to place the document and its ideas in context. A summary is different from an abstract in that it assumes that the reader will have the opportunity to peruse the accompanying text. Hence, certain elements essential to a complete understanding of the text, typically the background, purpose and methodology tend not to be present in a summary.

Many other terms are used to denote a regurgitation or abbreviation of document content, some of which can be briefly mentioned. An abridgement is usually taken to be a reduction of the original that necessarily omits a number of secondary points, and is, therefore, a relatively general term. A precis is an account which restricts itself to the essential points of an argument. A paraphrase is an interpretation of the ideas encoded in a document, and a translation into the language

of the writer of the paraphrase. A digest should be a methodically arranged presentation of the main arguments in a document. And, lastly, a synopsis is the term that was originally used to denote a resumé prepared by the author of a work.

The preceding should serve to emphasize some of the different approaches to document abridgement. However, the distinction between one term and another is often not very clear, and the terms are not always used in their strict sense.

The purpose of abstracts

What is the motivation for studying and preparing abstracts? Abstracts are widely used as an aid to the reader in assessing the contents of a document and their potential relevance. The document may be a report, journal article, thesis, patent, contribution in a conference proceedings, standard, letter etc. In what respects can a student profit from a knowledge of abstracts and by developing abstracting skills? Plainly, since abstracts are widely used, some librarians and information officers find themselves engaged in preparing abstracts. But even the student who has no intention of entering the sector of the profession that is responsible for the production of abstracts will find abstracting skills valuable. They can help in effective note-taking, digestion of current literature, analysis of committee papers and the presentation of reports. The efficient analysis of professional and technical documents is an asset in many spheres of activity.

Abstracts are a vital aid in document selection and information gathering, and help to avoid duplication and delay in work in progress. In recognition of their importance, abstracts are found in both primary and secondary publications.

Abstracts in primary publications are generally found accompanying reports of research and other developments in both the published and unpublished report literature, in journal articles, reports of professional, scientific and technical meetings and conferences, theses, books and patent applications and specifications. In a journal most formal items including articles, essays, discussions and reviews can be expected to be accompanied by an abstract. Notes, short communications, a popular treatment, and editorials are less likely to carry an abstract. Such abstracts are a valuable indicator of content and facilitate rapid scanning of the contents of documents instead of, or prior to, reading the abstracted document. However, abstracts associated with primary documents are often written by the authors of the documents who are not trained abstractors. These abstracts suffer from the usual limitations of author abstracts (see below).

Abstracts are the cornerstone of secondary publications. Together with indexes, abstracts have for some time constituted a major com-

ponent of published abstracting services, literature reviews and bibliographies. Today, the large computer based bibliographic databases associated with abstracting and indexing services also use abstracts as their chief means of document representation. Hence, many retrospective and current awareness services derived from these databases also feature abstracts. Although abstracts have this dual role, they are perhaps more valuable in retrospective searching than in current awareness devices. The inclusion of abstracts in a current awareness publication tends to impair the currency of an information service – abstracts take time to prepare. Further, retrospective searches sometimes involve larger numbers of potentially relevant documents than current awareness scanning, and hence it is more valuable to be able to distinguish between possibly relevant documents rapidly. It is difficult, if not impossible to scan a large number of complete documents, and it is unlikely that they will all be accessible within one library. Both locally produced abstracts bulletins and other current awareness services, and abstracts journals feature abstracts. The role of abstracts in these various information tools will be reviewed more fully in Chapter 9.

Wherever abstracts are found they are used for one primary objective: to save the user's time in information gathering and selection. Later, the various types of abstract and their unique roles will be reviewed, but regardless of the type of abstract this objective remains paramount. By digesting information on behalf of the user, and making his information gathering more efficient, the abstractor aims to make a significant impact upon research and decision making. An improved awareness of existing work should strengthen the foundations of new investigations, and reduce the degree of duplication. An alertness to work in related fields may stimulate creativity in disseminating ideas from one field of study to another, for both the researcher and the manager. In the light of the information explosion, no researcher can now realistically expect to keep pace with developments in his own field, let alone those in allied fields. The expansion of knowledge presents an even more serious problem for other practitioners, such as managers and teachers who need to keep abreast of a relatively wide field in a general way. Abstracts may also make a contribution to overcoming the language barrier, for they make it easier to judge the necessity of translation, and may, on occasions, remove the need for a translation. Abstracts also aid in the compilation and provision of other tools such as indexes, bibliographies and reviews.

Many different abstracts, with different styles and content can be derived from one original. Their diversity is related to the extent to which any given abstract is designed to save a user's time, and the diversity of user needs. Although we shall return to this point later, it is convenient now to introduce the idea that the time saved by the

abstract for the user depends upon the nature of both the abstract and the original. Some of the factors affecting the value of abstracts are:

1 abstract length – a longer abstract can help in the finer points of selection, but will take longer to write and also longer to scan;

2 abstract orientation – an abstract orientated towards a given user's interests will be of maximum value to that user, but will possibly have less utility for other users than an abstract tailored to a general audience;

3 abstract quality;

4 the nature of the original document – for example, an English language abstract of a foreign language document makes some of the ideas in the foreign language parent document more accessible.

Types of abstracts

There exists a range of labels that are commonly used to describe abstracts. This section examines some of these labels and reviews a variety of approaches to the style and content of an abstract. Despite the school of thought that believes only informative and indicative abstracts can be regarded as true abstracts we will explore many other additional terms. The most appropriate type of abstract in any one set of circumstances will be a function of the nature of the original document and the anticipated readership. For this reason, most information services that have occasion to include abstracts will exploit more than one type of abstract. Further, the labels discussed below are not exclusive, and in some cases it may be appropriate to apply more than one of these labels to one abstract. For example, an abstract may be both informative and homotopic.

Informative abstracts present as much as possible of the quantitative or qualitative information contained in a document. This satisfies twin objectives. Informative abstracts both aid in the assessment of document relevance and selection or rejection, and act as a substitute for the document when a superficial or outline knowledge of document content is satisfactory. An informative abstract presents a clear condensation of the essential arguments and findings of the original.

In order to fulfil their twin objectives informative abstracts tend to be lengthier than other abstracts. Typically, papers or journal articles merit abstracts extending to 100 or 250 words, whilst 500 words may be appropriate for more substantial reports and theses. Nevertheless, length should suit the document and an informative abstract need not be of any specified length. Informative abstracts are often easier to write and more desirable than indicative abstracts for texts describing experimental work and documents centred upon one theme, but can be time consuming and expensive to produce. A fully informative abstract will be impossible to prepare for many discussion papers and

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