Library & information science vs business: a comparison of approaches to abstracting

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A variety of abstracting publications from library & information science and business are examined and contrasted in their approaches to the following aspects of abstracting: (a) definitions of abstracts; (b) types of abstracts; (c) purpose of abstracts; and (d) writing of abstracts.

introduction

A library and information science (LIS) course in abstracting would not be complete without a bibliography of the major works in this area. A search for items to include in such a bibliography resulted in the discovery of a variety of ‘abstracting’ literature written in the field of business. The LIS literature tends, for the most part, to emphasize that abstracting is conducted largely by indexing and abstracting services, or by producers of electronic files and indexes. Little, if any, mention is made about abstracting conducted in the corporate/ business environment. The business literature retrieved, on the other hand, suggests that abstracting is a very important component of business writing. It would appear that the LIS literature has not acknowledged a potentially important market potential for LIS students skilled in abstracting.

This search raised three main questions: how does the business field approach abstracting; how does this approach concur with, or differ from, the LIS approach; and can any aspects of business abstracting be incorporated into LIS courses in abstracting? In order to answer these questions, a variety of publications from LIS and business was examined. Only those publications that provide the basic “how-tos” of abstracting were chosen. The publications were examined and contrasted in their approaches to the following aspects of abstracting:

1. Definitions of abstracts.
2. Types of abstracts.
3. Purpose of abstracts.
4. Writing of abstracts.

definitions of abstracts

LIS

The LIS publications have no one standard definition of an abstract. Lancaster and Rowley define an abstract as a brief but accurate representation of the contents of an original document (Lancaster 1991, Rowley 1988). To this basic definition, Borko & Bernier add that an abstract contains no added interpretation or criticism of the original document (Borko & Bernier 1975). This addendum is misleading because it suggests that there is no scope for criticism in the writing of abstracts; critical abstracts, however, form a major type of abstract in LIS.

These definitions highlight two common characteristics for abstracts: brevity and the accurate representation of the original document. The concept of brevity, however, is not a fixed one. Brevity is associated largely with the length of the abstract, in relation to the length of the original document (ANSI 1979). Borko & Bernier equate accuracy with stylistic elements, such as proper spelling, etc. (Borko & Bernier 1975). The American National Standards Institute (ANSI) standards and Rowley suggest that an abstract should be self-contained, since it must be intelligible without reference to the document itself (ANSI 1979, Rowley 1983). As will be discussed later, different types of abstracts represent differently the contents of the original documents upon which they are based, hence the degree to which an abstract is ‘self-contained’ can vary significantly.

LIS vs business

The LIS and business publications do not differ too much in their definitions of abstracts. An abstract/ executive summary contains a brief and accurate representation of the contents of an original document, although neither field agrees on what is meant by brevity and accuracy. Based upon the definitions in the business publications, it would appear that an executive summary is tantamount to an abstract in LIS. For this reason, the word “abstract” will be used henceforth for both fields.
The purpose of abstracts

The LIS publications agree that the purpose of abstracts is to save the reader's time in information gathering and selection, since they facilitate the rapid scanning of the content of the original document by obviating the need to read the entire text (ANSI 1979, Cremins 1996, Lancaster 1991, Rowley 1988).

The LIS publications appear to agree that convenience to the reader is the underlying purpose for abstracts. What is interesting to note is that these publications place a minor emphasis upon the purpose of an abstract in relation to the more 'technical' discussions of what an abstract should contain and how it should be written. Since the extent to which abstracts meet their purpose depends very heavily upon their content and their quality, a stronger emphasis upon the latter two areas might be natural and more helpful to the abstractor. On the other hand, however, one wonders whether an abstractor could get lost in these 'technicalities' at the expense of remembering the purpose for which the abstract is written in the first place.

Business

An abstract enables business executives to determine quickly what the original document is about, why it is important, and whether to read it in its entirety (AMA 1996, Bailey 1990, Swenson 1983). Jewinski & Jewinski stress that before an abstract can be written, it is important to determine the audience for, and the potential use of, the abstract (Jewinski & Jewinski 1990).

The business publications are very consistent in their explanation of the purpose of an abstract, namely, that it serves the 'convenience' of busy executives. What is interesting is the importance that is attributed to this. The business publications all emphasize that before one can write an abstract, it is crucial that one understand not only its purpose, but also its intended audience. The business publications, in other words, are very user-oriented in their approach to the writing of abstracts.

LIS vs business

It is clear that LIS and business concur that the convenience of the reader is the primary purpose of the abstract. The LIS publications, however, tend to focus more upon the different types of abstracts and how they are written, and less upon their purpose. In business, on the other hand, is much more user-oriented in that a much stronger emphasis is placed upon the purpose and audience of an abstract. In this respect, the business publications are superior to their LIS counterparts, which occasionally fall into the habit of treating the writing of an abstract as an academic exercise removed from any real purpose or audience. The more pragmatic, user-oriented approach of business would be very beneficial to LIS students, as it reminds them that at the end of the day, an abstract is useful only if it meets the needs of its readers.

Types of abstracts

LIS

The LIS publications identify three major types of abstracts: indicative, informative, and critical abstracts. An indicative abstract may contain information about the purpose, scope, and methodology of the original document, but not about the results obtained, conclusions, or recommendations. Because of its general contents, the indicative abstract cannot act as a good substitute for the original document (ANSI 1979, Cleveland & Cleveland 1990, Cremins 1996, Lancaster 1991, Rowley 1988).

An informative abstract should contain: (a) the objective and scope of the work; (b) the methodology used; (c) the results obtained; and (d) the conclusions and recommendations, usually presented in this sequential order. Because of its detailed contents, the informative abstract can act as a substitute for the original document (ANSI 1979, Cleveland & Cleveland 1990, Cremins 1996, Lancaster 1991, Rowley 1988).

A critical abstract makes a value judgment or editorial comment about the original document: abstractors express their views on the quality of the original document, the methodology used, the validity and reliability of the results obtained, and so forth. Because critical abstracts require the abstractor to be highly skilled in not only the subject area, but also in research methods and statistical analysis, critical abstracts tend to be rather rare (ANSI 1979, Cleveland & Cleveland 1990, Lancaster 1991, Rowley 1988).

Business

Swenson and Waters indicate that the descriptive abstract is a table of contents of the original document in narrative style. Neither author specifies what should be contained in the descriptive abstract, indicating only that the findings, conclusions, and recommendations reported in the original document are not usually included in the abstract (Swenson 1983, Waters 1982).

An informative abstract should contain the purpose, findings, conclusions, and recommendations contained in the original document and can act as a substitute for the original (Swenson 1983, Waters 1982).

The analytical abstract evaluates the merits of the original document, including interpretations of what the data might mean. The critical abstract contains the abstractor's judgments about the contents of the original document and includes an assessment of the validity and reliability of the results obtained (Waters 1982). The other business publications consulted do not distinguish among different types of abstracts.

The AMA guidelines suggest that an abstract contain (a) the major conclusions and recommendations; (b) financial considerations; and (c) deadlines or implementation points discussed in the original document (AMA 1996). Jewinski & Jewinski suggest that the abstract contain the (a) statement of purpose; (b) itemization of equipment used; (c) explanation of the procedures followed; (d) description of the observations and results; and (e) listing of the conclusions (Jewinski & Jewinski 1990).

Even though the business publications are not consistent in the labeling of the types of abstracts, they agree largely that an abstract should contain the purpose, methodology, results, conclusions, and recommendations of the original document be included in the abstract. In other words, the informative abstract emerges as dominant in the business field.
LIS vs business

The LIS literature is very consistent in its discussion of the main types of abstracts and their contents; the business literature stresses primarily the informative abstract. Since business executives use abstracts as decision-making tools, it could be that indicative-type abstracts simply do not provide enough information for this purpose. Critical abstracts would clearly aid decision-making, but are seldom discussed in the business literature. Since critical abstracts require a high degree of expertise not only in the subject matter of the document, but also in research methodology and statistical analysis, it is perhaps for these reasons that critical abstracts are rare in the business field.

how to write abstracts

LIS

The amount and quality of "how to" guidelines for writing an abstract varies considerably in the LIS literature. Lancaster and Borko & Bernier point to three main parts of the abstract: the reference section; the body of the abstract; and the signature section. Borko & Bernier outline very clearly the elements to be included in the reference and signature sections, but are not as specific in their explanation of how to write the body of the abstract (Borko & Bernier 1975). Lancaster defers to Cremmins (1996) for details about how to write an abstract and provides only very general guidelines for content analysis, such as omitting commonly-known information (Lancaster 1991).

Rowley identifies five steps in the writing of an abstract, including making notes of the main points contained in the original document and checking the abstract for punctuation, spelling, etc. Rowley provides tips for style and presentation; while useful, these tips are of a very general nature and do not help abstractors with such difficult tasks as isolating and distinguishing between the main and secondary points of the document (Rowley 1988).

Cleveland & Cleveland indicate that there are four steps in the writing of an abstract, including recording of the bibliographic reference and analyzing the content of the document. Very specific and useful tips are provided for identifying the different bibliographic elements and intellectual components of the original document (Cleveland & Cleveland 1990).

The ANSI standards describe clearly how to recognize the purpose, methodology, results, and conclusions outlined in the original document. The standards focus primarily, however, upon the presentation and style of the abstract (ANSI 1979). While the standards do discuss the content analysis of a document, their main strength lies in the provision of tips for writing style.

Cremmins gives general suggestions for the style and presentation of an abstract, based primarily upon the ANSI standards. Cremmins suggests four steps involved in the writing of abstracts, including the identification, extraction, and condensation of relevant information from the original document, and provides some useful tips for the content analysis of the original document (Cremmins 1996).

With the exception of Cleveland & Cleveland and Cremmins, the LIS publications focus principally upon the general style elements involved in writing an abstract. These style elements are certainly very important, because the readability, coherence and presentation of the abstract depend heavily upon them. The problem with these publications, however, is that they emphasize the style of the abstract rather than its content. Granted, if an abstract is poorly written, its usefulness to the reader could be sacrificed. On the other hand, style elements are probably easier to learn and apply than is the intellectual/cognitive process of identifying the relevant information contained in the original document. In other words, how does one guide abstractors in determining what constitutes relevant information and how to arrange this information in order of its significance? This cognitive process is the most challenging aspect of abstracting, yet it is largely ignored in the LIS literature, with the exception of Cremmins and Cleveland & Cleveland.

business

The business literature is not consistent in the amount and quality of "how to" guidelines it provides for how to write abstracts. Waters' guidelines are very general in nature, indicating that one should mark key words in the original document that identify major concepts and that these concepts be arranged in a logical sequence (Waters 1982). These guidelines do not help the abstractor, however, with the cognitive process of determining these major concepts.

Swenson identifies five steps involved in writing an abstract, including underlining the important elements in the original document and checking the abstract for accuracy. Swenson tends to simply list the important and unimportant elements that are contained in an original document, but does not explain their significance to the process of abstracting (Swenson 1983).

The AMA guidelines provide extremely general style tips, and absolutely no help in the area of the content analysis of the original document (AMA 1996). Given that this publication is a style manual, it is perhaps not surprising that it contains no information about content analysis, but one would expect it to contain a great deal more detail about the style and presentation of an abstract. This publication is virtually useless to the abstractor in the business field.

Jewinski & Jewinski provide rather general guidelines for the content analysis of the original document. The authors do a much more thorough job of explaining the style and presentation of an abstract, and provide excellent lists of "vigoros verbs" that can be used instead of "passive verbs," of short phrases to be used instead of long phrases, and so forth (Jewinski & Jewinski 1990). These lists are truly helpful both to abstractors and to the trainers of abstractors.

The business publications examined provide few useful "how to" guidelines for how to write an abstract. For the most part these guidelines are very general in nature and focus principally upon the style and presentation of the abstract. Swenson and Jewinski & Jewinski attempt to address the processes involved in the content analysis of the document, but do so in a very generic manner. It is all very well to state that the abstract should contain the relevant information found in the original document; the problem is that none of these publications does an adequate job of helping the abstractor identify this information.

LIS vs business

An examination of the LIS and business publications reveals some troublesome inadequacies in their provision of practical guidelines for writing abstracts. Both fields have useful tips for
the style and presentation of abstracts. The most challenging part of abstracting, namely, the content analysis of the original document, is not addressed sufficiently or at all by the majority of these publications. There is a glaring gap in the quality of these publications if they cannot address the underlying process involved in abstracting. The publications by Jewinski & Jewinski and Cremins provide the best guidelines for style elements; as for content analysis, those by Cleveland & Cleveland and Cremins appear to provide the 'best' guidelines, although as has been seen, 'best' is a very relative term in this context.

summary and conclusions

An examination of some of the LIS and business abstracting publications has revealed a number of similarities, differences, and inadequacies in the ways in which both fields approach abstracting. Neither field has an internally consistent definition of what constitutes an abstract, although both agree that brevity and accuracy are the key components of an abstract. Although the business publications often use the term 'executive summary', it is apparent that their usage of this term coincides very closely with the LIS definitions of an abstract. The literature in both fields needs to be more consistent in its definitions of what constitutes an abstract and what is meant by the brevity and accuracy of an abstract.

The LIS and business publications agree very closely about the purpose of an abstract. Both fields emphasize that abstracts are to serve the convenience of the readers; the fields differ, however, in the emphasis they place upon this purpose. The business literature stresses the purpose and audience of an abstract to a much greater extent than do the LIS publications. The strongly user-oriented approach of the business field would be an excellent addition to the LIS literature and to the training of LIS abstractors.

The LIS publications are very consistent in their identification of three types of abstracts and in the content of these types. The business publications are consistent only in their identification of informative abstracts and their content. Although descriptive and critical abstracts are suggested as possibilities in the business literature, they are dealt with in a very summary fashion. This is a potential shortcoming of the business literature, because it suggests to abstractors that only one type of abstract has merit, regardless of the type of original document or the reader of the abstract.

The LIS and business publications are virtually identical in their explanation of the content and scope of an informative abstract, and the practical information provided by Jewinski & Jewinski pertaining to identification of the main elements of an informative abstract would be of great use to LIS students and abstractors. Conversely, the LIS publications could be beneficial to abstractors in the business field in their discussion of descriptive and critical abstracts.

For the most part, both the LIS and business publications provide useful guidelines pertaining to the style and presentation of an abstract. The Jewinski & Jewinski publication provides very useful style "lists" that would be very beneficial to LIS students and abstractors. Neither field does an adequate job of addressing the cognitive process of abstracting, i.e., the content analysis of a document and the extraction of relevant information to be included in the abstract. The business literature is particularly weak in this latter area. As the LIS literature currently stands, business abstractors would benefit greatly from the content analysis tips provided by Cremins and Cleveland & Cleveland. At the end of the day, however, much more attention must be paid to the cognitive process of abstracting in the literatures of both fields.

The two fields of LIS and business do not appear to differ too much in their approach to abstracting. The purpose of abstracting appears to be common to both fields, and they agree upon the nature and content of the informative abstract. The two fields have virtually identical approaches to the style and presentation of an abstract and share a failure to explain the cognitive process of abstracting.

Because LIS and business do manifest so many similarities, it would be useful if the two fields were to work more closely in the area of abstracting. The more analytical LIS approach regarding the different types of abstracts could be used in business to broaden the scope of its abstracting services. The more user-oriented approach of business could be used in LIS, where the "whats" of abstracting are sometimes stressed over the "whys" of abstracting.

It is obvious that both fields need to develop more detailed guidelines pertaining to the cognitive process of abstracting. Since business and LIS share so many approaches to the purpose, content, and style of abstracts, it is not unreasonable to suggest that they share approaches to the extraction of relevant information to be included in an abstract. Comparative and cooperative studies of how this process of extraction is conducted in both fields could make a significant contribution to the training of abstractors and to the process of abstracting.

references


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