

Writing and scientific literature

Abstract – the trailer of scientific communication

BRUNO CAMELLI

Full Professor, Director of the Interdisciplinary Medical Unit of InCor, São Paulo, SP, Brazil

©2011 Elsevier Editora Ltda. All rights reserved.

Despite being the first section in the final manuscript submitted for publication, most of the time the abstract is the last item to be written by the author. The manuscript preparation has consumed much of his imagination, creativity, and writing, so that his energy is almost depleted. Often the result is poor, with unfavorable consequences for the dissemination, debate and, ultimately, for the main objectives of scientific communication. The abstract is a small sample of the full article content, a real trailer. The abstract is the only part of the article that can be universally obtained without cost via the internet directly from bibliographic databases such as PubMed/MEDLINE. After the title, it is the abstract that will catch the reader's interest in the topic discussed throughout the research paper, making comparison, questioning, clarifying, and raising new doubts. If the trailer is badly done, it will be difficult to encourage someone to see the whole movie.

Structured abstracts containing subheadings, such as introduction, methods, results and conclusion, should be preferred as they facilitate the work and the reader's understanding. Usually, journals limit the number of words of an abstract. For this reason, the text should be concise, without compromising the reader's understanding. Abbreviations should be avoided unless they are conventionally accepted. The use of terms and expressions which identify lines of research can be useful, as biosemantics tools like eTBLAST (<http://etest.vbi.vt.edu/etblast3/>) or Jane (<http://www.biosemantics.org/jane/>) use abstract to find articles, authors, and journals with similar works. This is a good way to identify potential reviewers and journals for which the article may be submitted.

The choice of keywords is also important. In the search for information through Google's site, the keywords can also indicate the path sought by the reader. The difference is that keywords can not be chosen freely. In 1960, the National Library of Medicine (NLM) of the United States published, for the first time, the Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) in order to catalog, index, categorize, and facilitate the search for medical journals. Currently, there are over 25,000 terms that can be selected from the site (MeSH <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/mesh/MBrowser.html>). Almost all journals use this tool to index their articles. The author has to choose and enter the appropriate keywords to more effectively promote his work, be found, and probably be cited by others.

Summarizing:

- Prefer structured abstract containing subheadings.
- Develop a clear and concise text obeying the word limit.
- Do not use abbreviations, unless they are conventionally accepted.
- Try to insert your key message prominently in the abstract, the "icing on the cake."
- Choose keywords and terms that make it possible to identify or classify your work with the work of other authors.
- Do not rush, think about the idea for a few days and show the work to colleagues, ask for opinion.

Good luck!