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## CONTEMPORARY ISSUES AND CHALLENGES OF ABSTRACT COMPOSITION WITHIN THE MILIEU OF ACADEMIC PAPER: OPTIONS, GUIDES AND NECESSARY FOR SELECTION

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### Introduction

As abstract remains a critical section and a core item in the composition of a conference paper; it is a prerequisite requirement for academic journal publications in which acceptance, rejection or otherwise of written paper(s) depend(s) largely on the accurateness, validity and carefully worded abstract. One of the determining factors for its accuracy is the inclusion of five (5) basic constituents of the abstract composition. Abstract follows a rigorous and structured format with the intention of capturing the essentials and helping the user to make a decision to proceed to use the real information, Cleveland, (2001:19). Authors are not expected to try to duplicate the original. Although it is argued that not all

### Abstract

*Despite vast researches by authors on various topics, issues and fields, little is known about the contemporary issues and challenges dominating the debate on abstract composition its unique words count and basic elements for academic conference paper. Academic paper writers often confused the type/form of abstract to adopt that best suits the kind of paper they doctored and authored. Given that, abstract is a miniaturised representation of the original document, providing a lead to the information required. It follows a structured format with the intention of capturing the essentials for the user to make a decision to proceed to use the real information or not. This is where academic paper writers are often found*

*fatally flawed in the extraction of abstract for a paper, hence its rudiments (academic elements) is taken for granted. This paper examined the concepts of abstract in line with the updated version of the APA referencing system. The study is an examination, analysis and critique of forms of abstract composition that seeks a critical approach to the paper writing. The study figured types of abstract in which paper writers should base their abstract on 5 keyed basic components. The study however recommended that prospective authors should consider journal guidelines in their abstract composition taking cognizance of the latest American Psychological Association provision. It is concluded that the paper is helpful to overcome the challenges academics face in the making of their abstract in the event of non-familiarity with the updated APA format.*

**Keyword:** *Issues, challenges, abstract composition, conference, paper.*

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Authors of papers are abstractors, but indeed all abstractors are authors, Kemper, (2007). The skill of abstractors is crucial in creating good abstracts for reader or users. In doing so, authors have to identify what type or mode of abstract that suits the contents of the paper discourse.

This paper argued that economic benefits accruing to Nigeria from the products of academic researches is not commensurate with the country's research outputs when put in contrast with the huge financial resources allocated to educational sector for quality researches. By implication however, quality abstract is an index for quality academic research. Many qualitative papers are found rejected and degraded for their poor quality in abstract extraction. This therefore, amount to the authors' financial spending bleeding to the teeth; thus putting their professional conscience and academic voltage at the risk for no other reason than their failure to reconstruct abstract as distinct unit.

Many academic paper writers confuse abstract for summary; whereas it is a distinct entity, perhaps more important than the summary. It is critical for prospective authors to note that abstract is a drug that is not harmful per se, but is dangerous when confused and taken with alcoholic summary.

However, abstract for academic conference paper must be composed to address its basic components which serves as the rudiment for a well thought

paper, be it empirical paper, reflection, theoretical, practical, or historical perspectives. These components include: statement of the problem/issue (this links to what actually is the problem which the title of the paper determines to treat/address?); approach (this links to how is the problem solved in terms of procedure, method, or literary analysis?); major facts/findings (What did the paper is able to find out or establish as its contribution to knowledge?); major recommendation; conclusion (what is the stand, point of view the paper hold about itself? This links to the position and decision of the paper not opinion of the writer).

It is against this background that this paper attempts to dig out type and mode of abstracts that prospective authors could determine to adopt for scientific and technological researches, arts and social sciences, which provide suitable clue for the construction of a good abstract. The study is also helpful to tackle the contemporary argument that „80% of published journals by Nigerian universities lecturers have no visibility in the international knowledge community“, Desert Herald newspaper, (August 4-10, 2015:34). This claim, was further buttressed in the assertion of Edward, (2012:215) quoted in Abubakar (2016:36) that „quality abstract, citations, proper review and references in Nigerian academic research works are still dominated by foreign references, Alexander, (2012:217). Thus, according to Alexander,„s study, (2012:215) portrayed a heavy lopsidedness slanted in favour of foreign authors.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Conceptualisation of Abstract

The word abstract comes from the Latin abstractum, which means a condensed form of a longer piece of writing, Adelaide, (2014:1). Abstract is a formal summary prepared by writer(s) or abstractors to completed works. It is an important tool for information users, especially as they strive to keep abreast of explosion of information.

As Zakari & et el, (nd:13) in Cleveland, (2001) further elucidated, that, abstract is a brief objective summary of the essential content of a book, article, speech, report, dissertation or other works that present the main points in the same order as the original but has no independent literary value. Abstract like all summaries should cover the main points of a piece of writing using the

same level of language and expertise found in the article or document being abstracted.

An abstract is a condensed version of a longer piece of writing that highlights the power point covered, it should concisely describe the content and scope of the writing and reviews the documents" content in summarized form.

According to Zakari (nd:20), asserted that abstract provides access to information and documents just like indexes but beyond this, it provides a summary of the details of a document in a concise and accurate manner. Abstracts are created to represent the original document by capturing the essential information thereby acting as a surrogate of the original document. With abstracts, the user may not need to see or use the original because it may probably provide him enough information or serve as a substitute to the document. Abstracts are noted to save the time of a user who needs to go through several documents, Zakari & et el, (nd: 20).

In another related work by The International Standard Organisation (ISO) (1976) cited in Aina (2004) viewed that "users of abstracts are able to identify the basic content of a document quickly and accurately, to determine its relevance to their interests, and thus be able to decide whether they need to read the document in it"s entirely or not". Abstracts are devices for information search, it represent the content of an item with words that are explicit to their information searches. They are a kind of formal summaries prepared by abstractors for completed works or documents. Abstracts are important tools for information users and readers as it brings them up to speed with todays" information explosion.

### **Abstracting an Abstract from a Full Paper**

According to Cleveland, et al (2001) quoted in Zakari & et el, (nd:13) defined abstracting as the preparation of a brief and objective statement of the content of documents to enable users to quickly determine whether to read the entire text or not in order to satisfy an information need.

It involves summarizing or interpreting the content of a document giving the salient points so that the user may decide whether to consult the document or not. In essence, abstracting process provides additional value to documents aside providing a summary and bibliographic detail of documents. This paper is in agreement with Zakari, Adetoto & Tijjani, (nd: 20-21) for advancing five (5) main goals that Abstracts serve:

1. Help readers decide if it is necessary to read the entire document.
2. Assist information users to remember the important findings on a topic.
3. Assist Information users understand a write-up serving as a pre-read.
4. Allow index write-ups achieve quick recovery and cross-referencing.
5. Allow readers/decision makers make efficient judgment without bordering about details.

### **Critical Argument on Abstract and its Implication on Conference Papers**

There exist in academia a critical argument amongst scholars over the exactness and universality and acceptability on the number of words that abstract should contain for academic journal publications. This uncertainty remains in contention for the academic conference papers, even though APA reference format is specific to the limit number of no more than 120 words only, (Introduction to APA Format 6thth edition, 2nd printing, p 5).

Notwithstanding, Swales & Christine, (2009) argued that abstract should be of 300 words or less. Writing a good abstract is a formidable undertaking and many novice researchers wonder how it is possible to condense months of work into 300 to 400 words. Nevertheless, creating a well-written abstract is a skill that can be learned and mastering the skill will increase the probability that your research will be selected for presentation, (<https://www.acponline.org/membership/residents/competitionsawards/abstracts/preparing/writing>). The length of abstract should be kept to about 200-300 words maximum for a typical standard length for journals).

To sum it up however, Abel Scribe (2010:5) in his work “APA (Style) Lite for College and Conference Papers” argued, abstract should reveal in concise terms what you studied and why, how you went about it, what you found, and the relevance of those findings. Quoting APA, 2009, p. 27) that “The maximum length varies by journal, usually 150 to 250 words. Keywords follow the abstract. To create a winning title, write out 6 to 10 keywords found in the abstract and string them into various sentences, (<https://www.acponline.org/membership/residents/competitionsawards/abstracts/preparing/writing>). Similarly, Andrade, (2011) buttressed that most journals require abstracts to conform to a formal structure within a word count of, usually, 200–250 words.

Moreover, considering that research literature and its supportive aspects has a special language that concisely and precisely communicates meaning to

other researches; abstracts should therefore contain these special language format/components to enable details of the paper accurately captured in its abstract composition. Many academic scholars and journals publishers argued on the number of basic components of abstract composition to be used.

Significant number of them came up with the number of components as suggestion for composing abstract. These are as follows:

According to APA Style (2010:5) recommended that abstract should involve:

1. The purpose of the research
2. The variables being investigated
3. A description of the participants
4. A description of the method including materials, data gathering procedures, names of tests.
5. A description of your findings; do NOT include numerical results
6. A conclusion

While to Andrade (2011) identified four (4) essential components needed for abstract composition; these are:

- I. Introduction/background
- II. Finding/Result
- III. Objective (methods)
- IV. Limitation

However, Leah (nd) advanced four (4) alternative components as necessary rudiment for composing abstracts to include:

- a. Motivation (problem statement)
- b. Method/procedure/approach
- c. Result/finding/product
- d. Conclusion/implication

In the work of Zakari & Tijjani (nd:74) came up with:

- i. Objective and scope of the document
- ii. Methods used
- iii. Results
- iv. Conclusion



Similarly, Adelaide (2014) stated that the following features should be identified for good abstract: i. Background (ii) Aim. (iii) Methods. (iv). Results. (v) Conclusion.

Deducing from the above points of view, this paper recommends the following basic formats (components) as a guideline for abstract composition catering for empirical study, theoretical papers, perspectives, reflections, scientific researches, arts and social sciences amongst others. These components are the meeting point for all papers and researches as highlighted on the introduction section:

1. Statement of the problem/issue
2. Facts/finding/observation
3. Approach/methodology/procedure
4. Conclusion/implication
5. Recommendation

#### **Statement of the Problem/Issue:**

This usually consists of several sentences outlining the question addressed by the research. Make the first sentence of the introduction as interesting and dramatic as possible, Kemper, (2007). For example, "100,000 people each year die of..." is more interesting than "An important cause of mortality is..." If space permits, provide a concise review of what is known about the problem addressed by the research, what remains unknown, and how your research project fills the knowledge gaps. This component provides general clue and outline on what is already known about the subject, related to the paper in question? Tell the reader with brevity the main point of argument in which the study seeks to address.

What is not known about the subject and hence what the study intended to examine (or what the paper seeks to present). In most cases, the background can be framed in just 2–3 sentences, with each sentence describing a different aspect of the information referred to above; sometimes, even a single sentence may suffice, Andrade, (2011); while noting that the reader is interested in the paper because of its findings and not because of its background.

#### **Facts/finding/Results/observation:**

This section is the most important part of the abstract and nothing should compromise its range and quality. This is because readers who peruse an

abstract do so to learn about the findings and establishments of the study. Here, what the author established should therefore be the longest part of the abstract and should contain as much detail about the paper as the journal word count permits.

In this component however, the abstract should list the facts, results or outcomes of the work you have done so far. If your project is not yet complete, you may still want to include preliminary results or your hypotheses about what those results will be, Kemper, 2007).

### **Approach/Methodology/Procedure:**

This links to procedure in which the author applied in gathering facts and data for the study. This is the method that the scientific or social sciences authors technically defined. The methods section is usually the second-longest section in the abstract. It should contain enough information to enable the reader to understand what was done, and how.

Kemper, (2007) noted that this is the most difficult section of the abstract to write. It must be scaled down sufficiently to allow the entire abstract to fit into the box, but at the same time it must be detailed enough to judge the validity of the work. For most clinical research abstracts, the following areas are specifically mentioned: research design; research setting; number of patients enrolled in the study and how they were selected; a description of the intervention (if appropriate); and a listing of the outcome variables and how they were measured. Finally, the statistical methods used to analyze the data are described.

### **Conclusion/Implication**

This section should contain the most important take-home message of the study, expressed in a few precisely worded sentences. Usually, the finding highlighted here relates to the primary outcome measure, Andrade, (2011). Note that it is customary to summarise the topics treated in the paper. This where authors are found flawed. What is essential is the stand and decision reached from the contents of the paper. The conclusion should contain three elements:

1. The primary take-home message
2. The additional findings of importance
3. The perspective



Hence its necessary brevity, the conclusion should also be scrupulously honest; and authors should not claim more than their data demonstrated, Andrade, (2011). The abstract should close with a statement of the work's implications/contributions to its field. It should convince readers that the paper is valuable and worth investigating further, Kemper, 2007).

There are two (2) main types of abstract identified by Tijjani, & et el (nd:74) according to its function:

### **Indicative Abstract:**

Indicative abstract is usually short and objective with the aim of alerting the user or reader of the existence of documents. Indicative abstracts describe the type and form of the work abstracted, indicating the major topics covered in the work and providing a brief description of the treatment of the facts and issues. It does not summarise the content or evaluate its quality.

What an indicative abstract does is that, it indicates the type of document being abstracted. In most cases abstracts are short, written in general terms and do not provide the reader a step by step account of the document's development. In other words, indicative abstract outlines topics covered in a document so that the reader can decide whether to read the document or not. In several ways, the indicative abstract is similar to table of contents in a paragraph form. Unlike an informative abstract, reading an indicative abstract cannot substitute for reading the real document as it does not capture the content of the document or paper. And because indicative abstracts fail to meet the other main objectives of abstracts as well as informative abstracts do, they are less common.

Indicative abstracts seldom provide the real content of documents and therefore they cannot be used as surrogate of the original document. They only inform the user what they can find in documents and not the real data or information contained in them.

### **Informative Abstract:**

This is an abstract that summarises as much of the essential content of a document as possible within the limitation of a paragraph. Informative abstracts attempt to convey the message of the original document, indicating all the important data including observations and conclusions. It captures all the essential details of a document presenting the actual information

contained in the original document. This enables the user of the abstract to have adequate knowledge of the content of the original document. It is a surrogate of the original document unlike indicative abstracts. Informative abstracts attempt to provide as much quantitative and qualitative data as possible, providing a useful guide to documents reporting an experimental investigation. They are a type of abridgement of the original document with the major ideas and fact well captured such that the users" needs not look for the original document or paper. An informative abstract should cover four essential points:

- a. Objective and scope of the document
- b. Methods used
- c. Results
- d. Conclusion

Other Variants of Abstracts Tijjani & et el identified other variants of abstracts formed under indicative or informative abstracts. These variants are:

### **Critical Abstracts:**

Critical abstracts are prepared with the purpose of making a value judgment on document. It may also be an editorial comment on the paper. Critical abstract reflect the content of document, indicating its depth and also commenting on the different aspects of the document.

The author is therefore a subject specialist who has a good grasp of the document"s content. Although some abstractor are of the opinion that a good abstract should stay clear of the bias and critical comments that characterise critical abstracts. Its strong point is that the writer is sufficiently knowledgeable of the subject areas of paper, its methodologies and other critical areas such that he is capable of making value judgments.

Critical abstract according to Cleveland et al (2001) is generally used on general papers with broad overviews, on reviews and also on monographs but can also be used for single papers.

It is important to say that the type of material or document and the users are the basis for deciding which type of abstract should be used.

### **Abstracts Classified by Use:**

Abstracts can also be grouped according to the purpose of their use. These abstracts are discipline oriented, mission oriented and slanted abstracts.

They are either informative, indicative or critical in their preparation or internal make up.

A discipline oriented abstract is produced on a specific area of knowledge or discipline; they are concerned with abstracting documents of a particular subject area. E.g. (chemical abstracts, Library and Information Science Abstracts LISA). Chemical abstract is devoted to the discipline of Chemistry while the Library and Information Science Abstract is for the field of Library and Information Science, (Zakari et el, nd).

A mission-oriented abstract is produced to support a particular assignment which may or may not be interdisciplinary in nature. This type of abstract focuses on an assignment rather than a subject area or discipline. The document being abstracted may be interdisciplinary but it is usually devoted to support application activities aimed at addressing a problem. While Slanted abstracts are often seen as a form of mission-oriented abstract, instead of focusing on the entire document being abstracted, it highlights a selected portion of document's subject content. It focuses on a particular section of the document which may be of interest to users.

For instance, a paper that discusses Primary Education, Secondary Education and Tertiary Education in Nigeria may have the author abstracting only the area of tertiary education if the user's interest is this area of the Educational System. The other sections of Primary and Secondary Education will not be captured in the abstract.

### **Abstracts Classified by Author:**

There are three categories of people who may produce abstracts. They are the authors of documents or papers, subject experts and professional abstractors. Abstracts in this category are author abstracts, professional abstracts and subject specialist abstracts.

Author abstract are prepared by authors who are experts in their discipline and so they are capable of distilling the essentials point in the document. The author(s) probably has many years of training and experience in writing of abstracts. Authors being experts in their subject areas should write good abstracts, however they do not necessarily make good abstractors especially because many of them are not skilled in the art of writing high quality abstracts.

Despite the foregoing, author abstracts are produced on time; they come with the manuscript and are less costly because no additional cost is needed if the author abstract is used.

Authors are generally not likely to produce good abstracts. They are very close to their manuscript to do an objective abstracting work. They fail to note that what they think is important may not necessarily be what users want in the document. Some use their abstract as a promotional tool for their papers neglecting the importance of users. For these, and also because authors may not be well skilled in the techniques, procedures and methods of abstract writing, they lack the experience required to do a good job, they are usually not good abstractors.

Professional abstracts are written by full-time professional abstractors. Although this group of people may not necessarily be experts in the subject areas, they are known to produce high quality abstracts especially when they work in disciplines they are very familiar with. They spend more time working on abstracts and can cover areas subject expert may not capture.

Abstracts produced by subject specialist are of high quality, this is because although they are professional abstractors, they are experts and professionals in their subject areas, and this qualifies them to write abstracts. This is the case with many abstracting journals that rely on subject specialist to produce their abstracts. In spite of these, a subject specialist may not be entirely an expert in all the areas of a wide subject area. He may also superimpose his thoughts and be reluctant to accept a new thought especially from an upcoming author.

### **Structured Abstracts:**

A structured abstract follows a set of sub-headings and the writer of the abstract fills in the blanks. It is believed that structured abstracts contain more cogent information and are of high quality and facilitate peer-review.

Structured abstracts are being adopted in the medical field and other disciplines today because of the inaccuracy of many abstracts. It is a kind of bibliographic control device for abstracting. Scientists now think that the publishing, storage and retrieval of their papers are integral parts of their activities; they rely on tools like structured abstracts to achieve retrieval of their documents. Structured abstracts provide headings under which the abstracts must be produced such as: Background, Aim, Method, Results, and

Conclusion. Some journals require that author submit structured abstract of their paper, this is to ensure that the important areas of the paper dealing with purpose, methodology and results are captured in an organised form. One weakness of this type of abstract is that it may not be about the user's interest.

By and large, in the inferences drawn by Leah Carroll, (nd), came up with the four (4) basic components of an abstract in any discipline, thus:

- 1) Motivation/problem statement: Why do we care about the problem? What practical, scientific, theoretical or artistic gap is your research filling?
- 2) Methods/procedure/approach: What did you actually do to get your results? (e.g. analyzed 3 novels, completed a series of 5 oil paintings, interviewed 17 students)
- 3) Results/findings/product: As a result of completing the above procedure, what did you learn/invent/create?
- 4) Conclusion/implications: What are the larger implications of your findings, especially for the problem/gap identified?

However, it's important to note that the weight accorded to the different components can vary by discipline or field of study. For models, Leah suggested that prospective paper writers/authors try to find abstracts of research that is similar to their research area.

Although, some journals still publish abstracts that are written as free-flowing paragraphs, most journals require abstracts to conform to a formal structure within a word count of, usually, 200–250 words. The usual sections defined in a structured abstract are the

Background, Methods, Results, and Conclusions; other headings with similar meanings may be used (eg, Introduction in place of Background or Findings in place of Results). Some journals include additional sections, such as Objectives (between Background and Methods) and Limitations (at the end of the abstract), Andrade, (2011).

Moreover, Zakari (nd:86) cited Salisbury, (2010), that, determining the amount of details summarised depends a great deal on what type of abstract you are writing (informative or indicative), the complexity of the paper being abstracted, the word limit and the purposes you imagine readers of your

abstract have for reading. Hence, research abstracts are usually requested as part of the application process for conference presenters.

### **Four C's of Abstract Writing**

The followings are stylistic considerations for writing abstract advanced by Kemper, (2007); the abstract should be one paragraph and should not exceed the word limit. Edit it closely to be sure it meets the Four C's of abstract writing:

Complete — it covers the major parts of the project.

Concise — it contains no excess wordiness or unnecessary information.

Clear — it is readable, well organized, and not too jargon-laden.

Cohesive — it flows smoothly between the parts.

### **Scientific Abstract Format**

Bates, (2011) stated that scientific format may seem confusing for the beginning science writer due to its rigid structure which is so different from writing in the humanities. One reason for using this format is that it is a means of efficiently communicating scientific findings to the broad community of scientists in a uniform manner. This format allows the paper to be read at several different levels. For example, many people skim Titles to find out what information is available on a subject. Others may read only titles and Abstracts. Those wanting to go deeper may look at the Tables and Figures in the Results, and so on. The take home point here is that the scientific format helps to insure that at whatever level a person reads your paper (beyond title skimming), they will likely get the key results and conclusions.

### **Conclusion**

The paper is apt in noting the broad types of abstract that the prospective writers for academic conference papers can select in line with the contents and issues of their research.

It is concluded that the paper is helpful especially on the challenges academics face in the composition of their abstract in the event of their non-familiarity with the updated version of APA format.

### **Recommendation**

1. Tertiary institutions should provide students with good writing skills for journal publication essential to the development of their career as part of the training course to enable them excel.



2. Before sending out abstract copy, prospective authors should consider journal guidelines in the construction of their abstract taking cognizance of the latest American Psychological Association provision.
3. Institutions of higher learning should co-opt courses and programs as necessary requirement for a research/writing curriculum for every academic session which promotes opportunities for abstract writing skills.
4. Schools and colleges should introduce academic interactive session geared towards encouraging qualitative research milieu; focusing on specific section(s) such as abstract, literature review, conceptual review, theoretical approach, and etcetera. This can be done at the level of faculty and schools.

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