Writing the Abstract: The Most Important Part of the Manuscript?

Probably the most difficult sections of a manuscript to write are the beginning paragraph, the ending paragraph, and the abstract. At least for me, I struggle with how to start, and I struggle with how to end. (I may also struggle with everything in between, but the structure and expression of the main body of the text usually comes more easily.) The last thing on my mind, however, is the abstract. To write the abstract last is actually appropriate, but writing the abstract last is often accompanied by giving that abstract only the tired remnants of my attention and energy. The abstract often feels sort of like an afterthought, something tacked on in compliance with the authors guide, completed after the real manuscript is written. Yet, in terms of the numbers of readers being reached, the abstract is arguably the most important part of the article (Landes, 1966; Pitkin & Branagan, 1998).

Just what is an abstract supposed to be? An abstract is a “condensation and concentration of the essential information contained in an article” (Landes, 1966, p. 1992). The key words here are essential information. The abstract needs to be short (The American Journal of Occupational Therapy® [AJOT] guidelines request approximately 150 words) and should convey the essence of the article, including the purpose, methods, findings, and conclusions.

For AJOT, an author may submit an abstract that is structured (contains requisite content headings) or unstructured (written as a narrative in paragraph form). The structured abstract was introduced into health care literature in the late 1980s (Ad Hoc Working Group for Critical Appraisal of the Medical Literature, 1987). Some journals require authors to use only the structured abstract, but as yet, no strong argument can be made regarding the advantages and disadvantages of either or both (Scherer & Crawley, 1998; Taddio et al., 1994). Some articles lend themselves well to using the structured headings of Objective, Method, Results, and Conclusions, which can help a reader quickly and clearly grasp the essentials of an article. Alternatively, some articles are better suited to being described in a narrative, especially those that do not fit the traditional scientific mode. Yet, narrative abstracts also contain what was done, how it was done, the results, and the conclusions.

I do not count the words in an abstract to check on whether it exceeds the recommended word limit, but I can tell when an abstract is too long and when the author has not stripped the abstract down to the bare essentials, as is needed. A double-spaced abstract of appropriate length for AJOT will be about two thirds of a page in length. Lowman (1988) stated that authors who write long, eloquent abstracts are actually producing introductions. I have noted this tendency in some of the abstracts that come across my desk. Usually, the rationale for a study, details about the methods, supplementary commentary, and interpretations are more appropriately included in the body of the text, not the abstract.

The abstract needs to be informative, meaning that it should contain information on what the study contributes, not simply indicate what the article contains. For example, instead of using an indicative sentence such as, “Results of the factor analysis are described,” the author should provide a summary of the actual results. Landes (1966) stated that such expressions as “is discussed” or “is described” should “never” appear in an abstract (p. 1992). Never is a pretty strong word, but these expressions are clearly indicative, not informative.

Just as the abstract is not an introduction, so too is it not an overgrown title. After the title, the abstract is the second level of communication to which the reader turns. The abstract needs to take the reader beyond the title to information on the essentials of the article. A well-written abstract serves as a guide to the article, providing the reader with a
beginning understanding of the presented topic and research.

One final, but by no means minor, concern relates to the accuracy of the abstract. According to Pitkin and Branagan (1998), three common inaccuracies occur in abstract writing: (a) inconsistency of data between the abstract and the body of the article, (b) data or information provided in the abstract but not present in the body, and (c) conclusions not justified by information in the abstract. I have seen all three of these inaccuracies represented in the manuscripts submitted to AJOT. Writing the abstract after rather than before completing the manuscript will help prevent these problems.

I think we all approach articles in a journal by first glancing down the titles on the table of contents and then reading the abstracts for the articles that relate to our interests. After that, we carefully choose a few articles to scan fully and then one or two to actually read in full. The emerging widespread use of electronic literature search mechanisms practically ensures the primacy of the abstract because it is often accessible in isolation from the article itself and may be the only section of the article that a reader ever sees.

Writing the abstract deserves the same energy and careful thought that is devoted to the body of the article. Although appropriately written only after the body of the manuscript is completed, the abstract is a critically important section of a published article. The composition of the abstract should be carefully developed to ensure clarity, brevity, the inclusion of essential information, and accuracy. The abstract may be the last “thing” to be written, but it should not be the last thing on our minds.

References


