

Scrutiny of the Abstract

by Kenneth K. Landes (Editor of the AAPG Bulletin, Ann Arbor, Michigan)

A B S T R A C T

The behavior of editors is discussed. What should be covered by an abstract is considered. The importance of the abstract is described. Dictionary definitions of "abstract" are quoted. At the conclusion a revised abstract is presented.

Presumably new editors, like new senators and small children, should be seen and not heard. But unfortunately the Association has elected (the electorate had no choice) an editor who is a nonconformist. For many years I have fretted over the inadequate abstract, and now perhaps I can do something about it--but not by keeping quiet.

Many of the abstracts appearing in the publications, including the meeting programs, of the A.A.P.G. can best be described by the use of a homely word that refers to an infestation by a certain minute organism. The abstract appearing at the beginning of this note is in that category. I regret to say that it is not an extreme case. My collection contains several that are worse. Dean Russell of Louisiana State refers to such abstracts as "expanded titles." They could also be looked upon as a table of contents, in paragraph form, with "is discussed" and "is described" added so as to furnish each subject with the verb necessary to complete the sentence. The reader is left completely in the dark not as to what the paper is about but as to what it tells! The information and the interpretation contained therein remain a mystery unless the reader takes the time to read or listen to the entire paper. Such abstracts can be likened to the "teasers" which your local movie manager shows you one week in the hope of bringing you back next week. But the busy geologist is more likely to be vexed than intrigued by the coy abstract.

To many geologists, especially the tyros in exposition, the writing of an abstract is an unwanted chore required at the last minute by a rule-ridden editor or insisted upon even before the paper has been written by a deadline-bedeveled program chairman. However, in terms of the market reached, the abstract is the most important part of the paper. For every individual who reads or listens to your entire paper, from ten to five hundred will read the abstract. It is much better to please than to antagonize this great audience. Papers written for oral presentation should be prepared with the deadline the abstract date instead of the delivery date. Later discoveries can be incorporated within the paper--and they would miss the program abstract anyway.

My dictionary describes an abstract as "a summary of a statement, document, speech, etc." and "that which concentrates in itself the essential qualities of anything more extensive or more general, or of several things; essence." The definition I like best has been set in italics. May all writers learn the art (it is not easy) of preparing an abstract containing the essential qualities of their compositions! With this goal in mind I append an abstract that I believe to be an improvement over the one appearing at the beginning of this discussion.

A B S T R A C T

The abstract is of utmost importance for it is read by 10 to 500 times more people than hear or read the entire article. It should not be a mere recital of the subjects covered, replete with such expressions as "is discussed" and "is described." It should be a condensation and concentration of the essential qualities of the paper.