THE (MANUSCRIPT- AND MANAGING-) EDITORIAL

Refining Titles and Abstracts

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Editors know that authors often add an article's title and abstract almost as an afterthought during the preparation of a manuscript. But these may be the most widely noticed elements of a scientific publication.

Titles

Iain Taylor pointed out that 80% of the literature is never cited, and in his opinion science is useless unless it is read about. An article's title is the key attraction to readers, whether skimming a journal's table of contents or reviewing the output of a database search. Throughout the lively and highly interactive discussion of the examples presented, several themes emerged. Most important, a title must be accessible (free of jargon, esoteric abbreviations, and extraneous information), complete, instructive, attractive, and informative. Authors should put themselves in the position of the readers and help readers to locate their article.

Most online bibliographic databases have complex search algorithms that give preference to title words. Not all such databases have abstracts, and the lack of an abstract reinforces the importance of a good descriptive title. Karen Patrias proposed 10 rules for writing good titles:

- Avoid "erudite" or "cutesy" titles that don't convey the subject of the article.
- Be as descriptive as possible, using specific rather than general terms (for example, the actual drug name rather than a class of drugs).
- Use simple word order and common word combinations, considering the search principle of "adjacency" (for example, use "juvenile delinquency", not "delinquency in juveniles").
- Avoid using acronyms and initialisms (for example, Ca, calcium, may be mistaken for CA, cancer).
- Avoid using Roman numerals for parts of articles to limit confusion between, for example, part III and factor III.
- Avoid using formulas and numbers for drugs and chemicals; use generic or common names.
- Write out scientific names (for example, *Channa punctatus*, not *C punctatus*).
- Don't assume that journal title words can assist in a search; most online systems do not include journal title words in their indexes.
- Become familiar with database "stop words", that is, "unsearchable" words.
- Be aware of guidelines issued by authoritative bodies and resources.

In response to an audience question, Patrias pointed out that the National Library of Medicine databases (and possibly others) do not consider journal-published key words when selecting index terms. (This piece of information prompted a rhetorical question from the back of the room: "Then what are we including them for?")

Abstracts

Taylor recommends that article writing start with composing the abstract. After the article has been written, the abstract can be edited to conform to the content of the article.

Patrias described computer-compatible writing and editing. *Computer-compatible* means articles are easily retrievable by a search of online databases. This carried on the theme Taylor introduced that articles must be found if they are to be read. Readers increasingly rely on computer searches to locate articles on the basis of authors' names, article titles, and abstracts. Patrias offered five guidelines for abstracts:

- Include synonyms for words and concepts presented in the title.
- As with titles, watch word order.
- Make sure key concepts of the article are covered.
- Use structured abstracts when appropriate.
- Don't make up abbreviations to save space.

Author Names

Author names are the third manuscript element that is searchable. Patrias urges authors to be consistent in how their names appear in publication bylines, for example, designations "Jr" and "III" and use of middle initials. She also advocates a system by which surnames are clearly distinguished (for example, capitalization of Chinese surnames).

Conclusions

Both authors and readers benefit from knowing how search engines work. Most online systems have complex search algorithms that give preference to title words and the vocabulary in the abstract. To draw potential readers to their articles, authors need to know how to construct titles and abstracts. Readers need to know how database search engines work best so they can search most effectively. ☙