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# Guidelines for Abstracts

**Abstract:** Guidance is presented for authors and editors preparing abstracts that represent the content of texts reporting on the results of experimental work or descriptive or discursive studies. Suggestions for the placement of abstracts within publications or other media are given, along with recommendations for abstracting specific documents. Types of abstracts and their content are described. Also included are suggestions on the style of abstracts and a list of selected readings on the subject of abstracting. Examples of abstracts are appended.

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**An American National Standard  
Developed by the  
National Information Standards Organization**

**Approved November 27, 1996 by the  
American National Standards Institute**

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## Foreword

(This foreword is not part of the American National Standard Guidelines for Abstracts, ANSI/NISO Z39.14-1997. It is included for information only.)

The growing volume of documents or texts containing information that warrants abstracting makes a well-prepared abstract increasingly important. Basic content must be quickly identifiable, both by readers of the primary literature and by users of access services (sometimes also referred to as secondary, database, or abstracting and indexing services). Authors and editors can help users to readily identify content by beginning a primary document or text with a meaningful title and a well-prepared abstract. Indeed, authors must bear in mind that many people will selectively read no more than these components of their writings.

In addition to the need for authors to write good abstracts for increasingly selective reading, it is also desirable for them to write abstracts that access services can reproduce with little or no change, copyright permitting. Always important to users of traditional access publications, abstracts have also proved to be of considerable importance to users of electronic bibliographic services such as online searching and selective dissemination of information (SDI) alerting, including systems employing full-text search. Abstracts that are well-prepared by authors ensure the accuracy of content and avoid unnecessary duplication of intellectual effort. As the quality of abstracts increases, so does the number of abstracts that can be directly employed by these access services, and thus the quality of the services for users.

This standard is the second revision of the American National Standard for Writing Abstracts, ANSI Z39.14-1971, which was prepared by Subcommittee 6 of the then-American National Standards Committee on Standardization in the Field of Library Work, Documentation, and Related Publishing Practices, Z39 (now NISO). The first revision of ANSI Z39.14-1971 was issued as ANSI Z39.14-1979.

This current revision is based on several comments received in 1992 from NISO members during their review of ANSI Z39.14-1979. It incorporates helpful changes and additional examples from ISO 214-1976, the International Standard on Abstracts for Publications and Documentation.

The International Standard was developed between 1971 and 1975 by an ad hoc Working Group of ISO/TC 46, headed by the chairman of Z39/Subcommittee 6. It was largely based on ANSI Z39.14-1971.

It is pertinent to review briefly here how the original edition, ANSI Z39.14-1971, was prepared. Subcommittee 6 was appointed in January 1969 to complete the task of drafting a standard on writing abstracts, an assignment begun by two previous subcommittees. The new subcommittee drew heavily on the work of its predecessors and on a guide prepared by the International Union of Pure and Applied Physics, the American Institute of Physics, and UNESCO. The subcommittee members were chosen for their expertise in the writing and editing of papers, journals, and reports; the preparation of abstracts, including their computer searching; and the teaching of abstracting. Thus, members represented both discipline and mission orientations, and were involved in the communication of knowledge in such diverse fields as education, psychology, chemistry, physics, and biology.

Copies of the draft of the standard were sent to groups working on national and international standards on abstracting, to all members of the Z39 Committee, and to many individuals and groups known to be concerned with the writing of abstracts. The draft was then extensively revised to take into account the more than 50 substantive comments that were received.

In the years since this standard was first issued authors and editors in many primary publications have followed its principles. In the same period, its principles have also effected changes in the practices of major access services.

The current revision committee has focused on the differences in form and content between informative and indicative abstracts; the topics of structural abstracts, electronic abstracts, information retrieval, and the content of abstracts; and on renaming the standard. Additionally, the committee has expanded the list of selected readings on the subject of abstracting and added new examples of abstracts.

This standard was processed and approved for submittal to ANSI by the National Information

*(continued)*

Standards Organization. It was balloted by the NISO Voting Members April 30, 1996–July 31, 1996. It will next be reviewed in 2002. Suggestions for improving this standard should be sent to the National Information Standards Organization,

4733 Bethesda Avenue, Bethesda, MD 20814, telephone (301) 654-2512. NISO approval of this standard does not necessarily imply that all members voted for its approval. At the time it approved this standard, NISO had the following members:

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# Guidelines for Abstracts

## 1. Introduction

In this standard, the term *abstract* signifies a brief, objective representation of the contents of a primary document or an oral presentation. The term *abstract* should not be confused with the related but distinct terms: *annotation*, *extract*, *summary*, and *synoptic* (see Section 3, Definitions).

Superscript numbers are keyed to the references listed on page 5.

### 1.1 Purpose

This standard is intended to guide authors and the staffs of access services in preparing abstracts of maximum usefulness.

### 1.2 Scope

The recommendations of this standard apply to all abstracts whether written by the author(s) of a document or by anyone else, and whether they accompany the document, appear in access publications or services, or as separately published representations of formal oral presentations.

## 2. Referenced Standards

This standard is intended to be used in conjunction with the following standards. When these standards are superseded by revisions, the revisions shall apply.

ANSI Z39.5-1985, Abbreviation of Titles and Publications.

ANSI/NISO Z39.18-1995, Scientific and Technical Reports—Elements, Organization, and Design.

## 3. Definitions

**Abstract**—A brief and objective representation of a **document** or an oral presentation.

**Access publication or service**—A print- or computer-based collection of **abstracts** and bibliographic references that serve as alerting or retrospective access keys, or both, to original documents.

**Annotation**—Brief explanation of a document or its contents, usually added as a note to clarify a title.

**Controlled vocabulary**—A list of terms that may be used for indexing.<sup>1</sup>

**Critical abstract**—Uncommon form of abstract that contains evaluative comments on the significance of the material abstracted or the style of its presentation. The comments are written by abstractors who are usually subject-area specialists. See Example V-A in the Appendix.

**Descriptor**—A **term** chosen as the preferred representation for a concept or feature in an index.<sup>1</sup>

**Document**—An item, printed or otherwise, that is amenable to abstracting; applicable not only to written and printed materials in paper or microform versions (e.g., books, journals, maps, diagrams), but also to nonprint media (e.g., machine-readable records, transparencies, audiotapes, videotapes) and, by extension, to three-dimensional objects or realia (e.g., museum objects and specimens).<sup>2</sup>

**Electronic abstract**—One that is contained in an electronic publication.

**Extract**—One or more portions of a document selected to represent the whole.

**Free-text search**—Information retrieval search using natural-language terms appearing in documents or their descriptions.<sup>1</sup>

**Identifier**—A proper name (or its abbreviation) of a person, institution, place, object, operation or process, optionally treated as a type of term distinct from **descriptor**.<sup>1</sup>

**Keyword**—A word occurring in the natural language of a document or its surrogate that is considered significant for indexing and retrieval.

**Slanted abstract**—One designed to represent a particular portion of, or a particular perspective on, a document for the benefit of a specialized audience. See Example V-B in the Appendix.

**Structured abstract**—An abstract that is arranged according to prescribed headings. See Example I-I in the Appendix.

**Summary**—A brief restatement within a document (usually at the end) of its salient findings