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Article 1

Abstracts for Numeracy

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Editorial – Abstracts for Numeracy

A pleasure of reading papers in the field of numeracy is that one visits many disciplines. In reading abstracts, I am beginning to imagine myself a little like an anthropologist on a field trip. Different disciplines seem to have different abstract-writing cultures. Some communities seem to have abstracts that serve as summaries of their papers, complete with objectives, results and conclusions; these abstracts are helpful as I look for content. Some communities seem to have abstracts that are previews, like a table of contents in paragraph form; these movie-trailer abstracts are inadequate, more frustrating than illuminating.

Todd Chavez of the USF Libraries and I have an article in this issue of *Numeracy* on a 338-item bibliography of papers in so-called impact journals. We include a link and guide to an online version of that bibliography¹ that provides access to abstracts of the vast majority of those papers. Look at Paper 51, “Inadequate functional health literacy among patients at 2 public hospitals,” published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. This abstract states the objective, design, setting, subjects (patients), main outcome measure, results, and conclusions. Then look at Paper 103, “Some class-participation demonstrations for introductory probability and statistics,” published in the *Journal of Educational and Behavioral Statistics*. This abstract consists of one sentence that says about the same thing as the title.

It may be because of limited visits, but my impression is that mathematics publishing does not have a culture of informative, stand-alone abstracts. Therefore, with the heavy participation of mathematicians in this journal, I am afraid that I anticipate manuscript submissions with abstracts more like Paper 103 than Paper 51. Why afraid? For our new cross-disciplinary field, we need abstracts like that of Paper 51. We live in busy times. We want busy people to know the content of our papers. We do not want to put barriers in their way. Uninformative abstracts are, at best, obstacles to information seekers. At worst, they are annoying and become barriers.

As a geologist, my education in writing abstracts was influenced by K. K. Landes, who changed the abstract-writing culture in all of publishing geology while editor of the *Bulletin of the Association of Petroleum Geologists*. His one-page scrutiny of the inadequate abstract² has been required reading in “Geological Writing” courses for more than 50 years. Of course, as an editor of *Numeracy*, I will ask authors to have informative, complete, stand-alone abstracts.

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¹ http://www.lib.usf.edu/Numeracy/V-C_2008-07

² http://www.aapg.org/bulletin/abstract_scrutiny.pdf