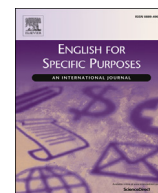




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Tracing the development of an emergent part-genre: The author summary



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ABSTRACT

The ongoing revolution in scientific publishing has led to a proliferation of new genres and part-genres designed to promote journal contents and attract new readers. One such innovation is the “author summary”, presented in some scientific journals as a non-technical summary intended for students. This article investigates the author summary, showing how it generally differs both qualitatively and quantitatively from the corresponding abstract. However, it also shows that there is a fairly high degree of uncertainty as to how the author summary should be written: the features are still unstable, and three distinct patterns can be observed: the “situated summary”, the “technical summary” and the “minimalist summary”. In view of this situation, the second phase of the research consisted of a reader perception study carried out in a group of 50 students. The results show that they found the “situated summary” preferable to the other types, and that this would therefore provide the most appropriate model for teaching purposes.

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1. Introduction

The world of scientific publications is currently undergoing a process of change which is likely to have far reaching consequences. The revolution in academic publishing sparked by the rise of open access journals is destabilising preconceived notions about how, where and what to publish, which in turn presents a challenge to the established economic models underlying mainstream journal publication (Cassella & Calvi, 2010). Perhaps as a response to heightened competition, publishers and editors are increasingly seeking ways to tap the creative potential afforded by digital media in order to produce brighter, more interactive journals in more flexible formats. The last few years have seen the introduction of new structural features such as “highlights” sections, which lend themselves to easy reading on a smartphone (<http://researchhighlights.elsevier.com/>), “blurbs” that can accompany the title of an article on a webpage, or attractive additions such as interactive graphics or video experiments. Since such phenomena are usually part of a larger whole, they can be best characterised as “part-genres” (Dudley-Evans, 2000). Amid the proliferation of new part-genres, however, abstracts and summaries still play a leading role. Authors themselves have been found to perceive the abstract as still being the constituent of the research article with “the greatest news value” (Pérez-Llantada, 2013: 230). It is therefore hardly surprising that innovative approaches to scientific publication, such as Elsevier’s influential “Article of the Future” project (<http://www.articleofthefuture.com>), designed to redefine the research article format to facilitate a more dynamic exchange of formal scientific research, devote some attention to creative ways of presenting or enhancing the abstract itself, by adding “graphical abstracts”, “animated

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graphical abstracts” or “video abstracts”, which are now being put into widespread practice (Pérez-Llantada, 2013). Without supplanting the traditional abstract, these variants enable the authors to display the main points of their research in innovative ways and perhaps even to reach new audiences.

One innovation in the area of abstracts that has emerged in the last decade is the special synopsis designed for a wider, non-specialist audience. The advantages of including such summaries are emphasised in a recent high-profile opinion article published by *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, in which the authors stress the benefits of devoting time and attention to producing non-technical summaries that will “increase the visibility, impact, and transparency of scientific research” and create “direct pathways between scientists and the general public” (Kuehne & Olden, 2015: 3585). Their arguments were quickly taken up by other scientific publishers, who agreed in principle that such summaries would be useful, but stressed that this is not a simple or straightforward project and that scientists might not have the right training for communicating to a wide audience (Woolston, 2015). In fact, such summaries are now increasingly being adopted by scientific journals, but, as might be expected in the case of an emergent part-genre, there is little consensus as to exactly what form or name these should take, how exactly the extended target audience should be defined, or indeed, whether the effort of producing such texts is worthwhile in the long term. Several of these initiatives were launched in the mid-2000s, and while some seem to be stabilising, others have foundered. For example, the introduction of a medium-length (up to 1000-word) popular summary, headed “Author Summary”, in *Science* in 2007, proved popular with many readers, but was not felt to justify the 20 staff hours required for its production, and was abandoned (Taylor, Bradford, Winston, Keeling, & Kuchment, 2008). On the other hand, the PLOS (Public Library of Science) suite began publishing shorter (150–200-word) non-technical summaries (under the heading “Synopsis” but hyperlinked as “Author Summary”) alongside the traditional abstracts in 2005. The heading for this appears as “Author Summary” in both text and hyperlink from 2007 onwards.¹ The “Author Summary” has now become fully established as a regular feature of the articles in all but one of the PLOS journals. A few other scientific journals have followed this lead, but with some variations: the “Lay Summary” was introduced in the journal *Functional Ecology* in 2011, intended to help authors “put their research into context for the wider scientific community and the general public” (Functional Ecology, 2015), but these summaries are longer (up to 350 words) and often contain illustrations. On the other hand, the journal *Behavioural Ecology* also now includes a “Lay Summary”, but this is really a kind of abridged abstract, no longer than 75 words, designed to “interpret the context and significance of our published papers in a manner intelligible to interested non-specialists” (Behavioural Ecology, 2015). The *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, for its part, has now also started to include less technical summaries. These are similar in purpose to the “Author Summaries” in PLOS, being aimed at “an undergraduate-educated scientist outside their field of specialty” (PNAS, 2015) but are rather shorter (maximum 120 words) and are called “Significance Statements”.

It thus seems that both the name and the format for what might broadly be termed a “non-specialist synopsis” are still unstable, but that a small but growing number of journals have perceived the usefulness of such an addition and are working towards creating viable formats (Kuehne & Olden, 2015). In view of this background, it is evident that the PLOS suite has a consistent track record in publishing such summaries, since they have been an obligatory feature of all but one of the journals in this suite for at least eight years. It is therefore reasonable to assume that the “Author Summary” is an accepted feature of these journals, and that in this time, a large enough body of samples has been published for us to talk in terms of an “emergent” part-genre within scientific publishing. On the other hand, since this is a relatively recent phenomenon compared with classic genres like the research article itself, it would hardly be surprising if some instability were to be found, which may be exacerbated by the fact that variations on this theme are to be found across other scientific journals. For this reason, an empirical investigation of the “Author Summary” as it appears towards the first decade of its life would appear to offer considerable interest, both from the perspective of genre studies, and with a view to practical applications.

The history of the “Author Summary” within PLOS can be summarised in a few words. PLOS, or the Public Library of Science, is a non-profit open access scientific publishing project which was launched in 2003 in response to an increasing demand from scientists for fast, open access publishing. It currently comprises seven journals, including the vast multi-disciplinary PLOS ONE, and others specialising in areas such as genetics or computational biology. With the exception of PLOS ONE, the PLOS journals all include educational and policy-related content in addition to research papers. This educational mission may partly influence the thinking behind the “Author Summary”. Since PLOS uses “Author Summary” to describe these texts, it is logical that this name should be used here, but it is perfectly possible that other journals and publishers might prefer to use other names for this type of text in the future (see discussion). Starting from the actual publisher’s guidelines, we find that the PLOS “instructions for authors” give a certain prominence to the “Author Summary”, defining it as “a 150–200 word non-technical summary”, distinct from the abstract, which is intended “to make findings accessible to an audience of both scientists and non-scientists” (PLOS, 2015). The text should target the “level of understanding of an undergraduate student”, and “the significance of the work should be presented simply, objectively, and without exaggeration” (PLOS, 2015). As to how this is to be achieved in terms of language and style, the instructions provide the following brief hints: “Authors should avoid the use of acronyms and

¹ The name itself may be a source of some confusion, since “Author Summary” is used elsewhere to denote a summary in another language (e.g. in the *Journal of Korean Medical Science*), or to describe biodata (e.g. *Nursing Education Research Conference*), while texts resembling the PLOS “Author Summary” in content, style and purpose are given different names elsewhere (e.g. “Lay Summary”, “Significance Statement”). In the present paper, “Author Summary” (AS) is used throughout to refer only to the sample texts from the PLOS suite collected to make this corpus. The terms “non-technical summary” or “non-technical synopsis” are used to refer to less technical summaries in general.

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