A Scheme for Understanding and Writing Summaries

David K. Farkas
University of Washington
Farkas AT UW.edu

ABSTRACT

Purpose: Writing a summary is not necessarily a straightforward task. Presented here is a scheme of twelve descriptors that reveals much of the complexity of summaries. The scheme can also serve as a design heuristic.

Methods: The scheme draws upon the psychology of text processing and applied linguistics and derives theoretically from the intertextual relationship between the summary and the summarized text and the contrast between summary as microcosm (miniature of the summarized text) and the many ways in which summaries are not microcosmic.

Results: The scheme consists of these twelve descriptors. The **Purpose** of the summary. The possibility of a **Specification constraint** that complicates the writing of the summary. **Reduction**, the length of a summary as a ratio of the summarized text. The **Phrasing**—informative or descriptive—of the summary. **Proportion and Exclusion**, how fully each part of the summarized text is represented in the summary. **Structure**, how the ideas in the summary are arranged in relation to the text. **Placement**, where in relation to the text (before, after, within, alongside, or independent of) a summary (or multiple summaries) may appear. **Addition**, the possibility of adding content to the summary that is not in the

text. **Authorship**, whether the author of the text (or an associate) or else someone not associated with the text wrote the summary. The **Stance**, **Style**, and **Format** of a summary.

Conclusion: The scheme advances our understanding of summaries, and, especially when used as a heuristic, can help technical communicators in their work. It may also be the basis of further research.

Keywords: summarization, summary writing, abstracts, design, heuristics

PRACTITIONER TAKEAWAYS

- There are many kinds of summaries other than those that appear at the beginning of a document. Also, while it's easy to assume that summaries are written as simple miniatures of the document, this is often not the case. In fact, there is considerable variation and much recent evolution in the writing of summaries.

- Presented here is a scheme of twelve descriptors that—with their accompanying discussions—provides a comprehensive and up-to-date look at summaries.

- The descriptors also function as a design heuristic that enables better summary writing and innovative design.