



Writing abstracts

Please read these brief [guidelines for writing abstracts](#). The section called *specific concerns*—only 113 words—is required reading!

Content

Convey every important aspect of the item in question. Nonessential matters should be omitted, so the reader will not be misled about the item's focus.

Avoid restating information given in the item's title; the abstract should add value to the record. Concentrate on the item's content, not its intellectual background. Address any findings, and do not point out well-known facts (e.g., that Bach was German). If the item presents a conclusion, state it clearly.

In general, an abstract should not exceed 200 words. Take into account the length and detail of the item to be abstracted; for example, most dissertations will merit full-length abstracts, while a short article may be summarized more briefly.

Style

Avoid colloquial or informal language and write in complete sentences. Do not include personal views on the value of the item being abstracted. Many effective abstracts resemble a single well-shaped paragraph, with topic sentence, development, and conclusion.

Writing in the voice of the author (declaratively) yields a more lively abstract than does describing the author's work, and it lends itself to specificity. For example, here is a pair of abstracts for an essay that accompanies a reissued sound recording:

(1) Discusses the recordings of Balinese music made by Odeon and Beka in 1928, which document traditions that are now lost. The changes taking place in Balinese gamelan music at that time are examined, and the influence of the recordings on Colin McPhee is described.

(2) In August 1928 representatives from the German record companies Odeon and Beka were sent to Bali; their efforts resulted in 98 recordings on 78 rpm discs of a wide variety of examples of Balinese music. As it happened, at that time Bali was undergoing an artistic revolution. A new style known as kebyar was rapidly gaining popularity, and older ceremonial instruments and styles were literally disappearing, as their bronze instruments were melted down and reforged to accommodate the new style's requirements; the Odeon/Beka recordings preserve several musical traditions that are now lost. These were the recordings that inspired the young Canadian composer Colin McPhee, who first heard them in 1929. McPhee went to Bali in 1931 and remained there for nearly a decade; his activities there included painstaking transcriptions of Balinese pieces.



The first of these is descriptive, the second declarative (author's voice). In theory, one can include the same information with either approach, but in practice, the declarative style forces a writer to be more specific; for example, where the descriptive version says "the changes taking place in Balinese gamelan music at that time are examined" the declarative version details these changes and adds a vivid image of reforging bronze instruments. Similarly, the influence of the recordings on McPhee is briefly described, not simply noted; McPhee is also identified, since he is not generally well-known. Notice how the descriptive style often involves passive verb constructions, which sap the vitality of the writing, while the declarative style tends to produce more robust sentences.

Specific concerns

- Give all societies, institutions, and other organizations their full names in their original language (e.g., Staatsbibliothek Preußischer Kulturbesitz, not Berlin State Library).
- Give full names for lesser-known persons or ones who might be confused with a more famous person with the same last name (e.g., Leopold Mozart).
- If you can, give true titles in the original language, followed by a parenthetical translation if most RILM users are unlikely to know the original (e.g., Ščelkunčik [The nutcracker]).
- If a manuscript is discussed and the RISM siglum and shelf number are provided, include them (e.g., I-Rvat MS CS.154).
- Indicate the time period under discussion as precisely as possible.

Further examples

Each of the following examples comprises an abstract (for a fictitious publication) with a number of lapses in style, followed by the same abstract rewritten with improvements.

EXAMPLE 1: Details and conclusions

A critical review of Schumann's method of composing. Schumann's compositional habits are considered as viewed by past scholars and in the light of new research. Comments by friends, and by Schumann himself, shed light on this question.

The author of this item obviously had an opinion, but the abstract states neither what that opinion was, how the opinion was formed, nor what conclusions were drawn. What were Schumann's methods? How have they been viewed? Who exactly (full personal name) held those views? Does the author provide a new conclusion? The following abstract shows how much more useful a well-written declarative abstract can be.

The belief widely accepted by scholars that Schumann composed only while in a kind of frenzy, or trance of inspiration, is refuted by many comments in letters and diary entries by him, and by the comments of contemporaries—the most notable admirer being Anton Gerhard Wilhelm von Alpenburg, his nephew. At least 13 remarks by Schumann between 1848 and 1850 refer to having worked hard, "though without much interest".



EXAMPLE 2: Sources

The author compares manuscript psalters from the 14th to the 16th centuries preserved in church archives.

For a scholarly article, the above abstract is too vague. Factual details are required, in addition to a clear presentation of the author's conclusions: the abstract states that "the author compares...", but what are the results? The following abstract both clarifies and summarizes. Note the inclusion of RISM library sigla with shelf numbers.

The St. Kevin Psalter (E-Dpc MS Kev.1234), the Steinhertz Psalters (D-KNd 9876), and all the psalters in the collection of the Ávila Cathedral (E-Ac 12, 34, 35, 36, 37, 453, 1120, 2231) show emendations in many hands, apparently added over long periods. Psalters from Eastern European sources (CZ-Psj MS 3456, 56788, and 56798–801; H-EGb ins. 4564–87) show emendations by a succession of apparently official scribes. Study of the emendations reveals a close relationship among all of these psalters, and variant readings have provided evidence with which to construct a tentative stemma.

EXAMPLE 3: Methodology

Discusses an experiment in vocal pedagogy.

Discussions of experiments describe the methodology and the subjects, and they present any conclusions that were drawn. All of these considerations should be reflected in the abstract.

A 12-month research project evaluated the usefulness of real-time visual feedback technology in the voice studio. Two teachers of singing and eight adult students (four using the technology, four serving as controls) were observed, interviewed, and videotaped; the participants also kept journals. The use of technology was found to positively affect teaching behaviors and student responses.

EXAMPLE 4: Transliteration and translation

Wedding ceremonies using the tupan in Brod, Macedonia, usually include at least three svirala players (svirlajje) and three tupan players (tupanje). When the musicians arrive on the third day, they go to Jelitsa hill to announce that all guests and musicians are present. As they descend the hill they play Jelichka, which leads into kolo dancing on Sleptsa meadow. At the groom's house, the musicians play Nebet, a piece honoring the head of the household.

RILM uses ISO transliteration standards for languages that use non-roman writing systems, even if the source uses a different system; the standard ISO transliteration of Macedonian Cyrillic yields svirladžije rather than svirlajje, Jelička rather than Jelichka, and Slepca rather than Sleptsa. Also, translations of foreign terms should follow them in parentheses, not the other way around. Alternate versions and explanations of terms or titles may also follow in parentheses. Note that true titles (i.e., *Jelička*; *Nebet*) are italicized, while genres (i.e., kolo) are not.

Wedding ceremonies using the tupan in Brod, Macedonia, usually include at least three svirladžije (svirala players) and three tupandžije (tupan players). When the musicians arrive on the third day, they go to Jelica hill to announce that all guests and musicians are present. As they descend the hill they play *Jelička*, which leads into kolo dancing on *Slepca* meadow. At the groom's house, the musicians play *Nebet* (or *Nibet*), a piece honoring the head of the household.