Research TL;DR

Where we make science short and sweet <3

TL;DR

Welcome to a collection of TL;DRs (*Too Long; Didn't Read*) for scientific research. **Why should I care? Read on page 3!**

Too busy to read full papers? Too funky to settle for the abstracts? Too human to ask a GPT to summarize it for you? **Check out some real-life TL;DRs on page 11!**

Tired of the impersonal tone, the repetitive style and the performance of seriousness? **Check out our how-to guide on page 17!**

Abstracts vs. TL;DR

Style in science, science in style

How do we summarize lengthy pieces of writing? Who are we summarizing for, and what should we summarize? How does technical medium and syntactic style play a role in such summarizing?

The Abstract

Scientific research is hardly separable from scientific communication. From the circulation of [Galileo's encrypted manuscripts](#) to the [Berlin Declaration on Open Access](#), the question of how to disseminate scientific writing across time, space and publics has remained a central concern of people working in and around academia.

In the middle of questions of propagation, attribution, intellectual property, sharing and access, **the abstract** is one device to address this concern. As a concise representation of a longer piece of writing, it is one of the main entrypoints into a work and, more often than not, the only part of the research which is actually read, as opposed to the skimming of a full text. It facilitates circulation through compression

Historically, the abstract appears around the same time as scientific production starts to increase (i.e. the turn of the 19th century) and as scientific societies start to review, organize and publish their peers' productions. First used as convenient records of academic meetings during which scientists presented their works, then used as a means to gain access to, and discuss, research written in a foreign language, these abstracts were quickly made available to the broader public under the name of *proceedings*.

There are a few things we can excavate from the historical roots of abstracts: they operate as means of *compression* (faced with quantity, it's better to have smaller, denser chunks), they were primarily used to *translate* publications in a foreign language (faced with estrangeness, it's easier translate a shorter text), and they aim at *broadening* the potential audience (experts are not the only ones interested in the production and reception of new knowledge).

In the 20th century, the abstract continued to perform as a shortcut to knowledge, following the ever-increasing industrial production of scientific material. Yet, its audience shifted slightly. Their writers focused on an academic readership, and so publications steered away from the (relatively) general (educated) public, and were subjected to a certain homogeneization, embracing the same academic style of writing of the papers they abstracted.

Today, abstracts are an integral part of the work they represent, written by the same authors, for the same audience, and even subject to the same constraints imposed by publishers on circulation—leading, for instance, to the founding of an [initiative for open abstracts](). Originally supposed to act as an interface, a stand-in for a longer text, and aimed at broadening an audience, the abstract became an integral aspect of the paper they were supposed to provide a bridge to: circulating in the same circles, abstracts stuck to their purpose as a mediator from scientists to scientists.

So these two things, the increase in the scale of scientific publishing and the consolidation of publishing monopolies, seem to have encouraged formal standardization (i.e. blankly andboring). Nowadays, abstracts' structure can be broadly divided into two categories: *informative* (i.e. exhaustive) and *descriptive* (i.e. superficial), while their syntactic style did not depart from the academic linguo which characterizes the larger field. There is as little diversity in how abstracts are written as in their intended audiences.

At the same time, the desire to further foster knowledge transfer is stronger than ever. Not in small part since the material conditions of scientific communication changed drastically with the popularization of the World Wide Web (whose creator, Tim Berners-Lee, designed it to be able to access and share scientific papers himself!). The overload of information that followed the adoption of personal digital communication networks is both an opportunity and a challenge in spread scientific thought. And yet, scientific papers would not be the only genre of written content in need of compression.

The TL;DR

The context is the attention economy: the accelerated circulation of information — scientific, journalistic, vernacular, etc. — which creates a competition for the (limited) focus of the receiver. Faced with this, people beyond academia have also come up with techniques to best represent a long chunk of written content in the most condensed manner. After the headline, the blurb, or the elevator pitch, **the tl;dr** (too long; didn't read) was first spotted online around 2002.

Written in response to a lengthy review of a video game (btw, a review is already an interface to a lengthy piece, and the scientific equivalent might be a book review), one of the people reading this only made clear the relation between the format of the piece (too long) and the resulting behaviour of the audience (didn't read). Such complaint, becoming particularly widespread across the budding social media sphere, became a widespread practice.

Originally, the tl;dr would be an answer to a post, but it eventually moved to being a part of the piece itself, moving from one paticipant in the discursive exchange to the other. Integrated to the original piece itself, it seems that the authors anticipated the readers' reactions. Located either at the beginning or at the end of the text, a tl;dr acts as a nutshell, a bottom line, a one-liner, if not a punch line! It aims at compensating the perceived dreariness of long-form, the meandering sentences, the mass of text scrolling across a screen, drowning the point of the message. It is the clearest and most honest kind of shortcuts. In this sense, it maintains a slightly different relationship with the main text than an abstract.

On one side, the abstract is about persuading the reader to get to the main text. It has this transitive role, through which the abstract is given value: either it leads to engaging with the content which it abstracts, or its contents are deemed uninteresting. Few readers would delve into a research paper just because the form of its abstract is engaging. On the other side, the tl;dr can stand by itself, and replace the underlying text altogether. Its value can be assessed despite the value of the underlying content. The tl;dr focuses on the fact that, if it is the only thing that will be read, it might as well be good! And so it rushes to get the point across in the little amount of time and interest that is given to it by the reader. There is a

spontaneity and urgency in the tl;dr which is hard to find in the abstract; it's about respect for other people's time, rather than respect for convention.

This spontaneity is hard to spot in the professional convcentions imposed on the abstract, which answers to a more explicit style exercise. There are also differences in audiences. For the abstract, this audience is made up of academic peers: people who are similar to the reader for professional reasons. For the tl;dr, the audience is still made up of peers, but of a different kind: they are people who are similar to the reader in the sense that there is too much to read and too little time. These two kinds of audiences played a different role in the development of each of those textual interface mechanisms: the abstract's first appearance was unrelated to the author, while the tl;dr appeared as a direct complaint to the author. Perhaps due to such straight remark, it is interesting to notice that the tl;dr does not really care about adhering to the style of the original text (if there ever was one).

The styles of communication

How we say things matters for capturing the attention of readers (see: clickbait).

For instance, you can change the content without changing the form, reducing the amount of information in an abstract without changing the form (keeping with the academic voice). Another way would be to change the form in order to communicate a consistent content (switching from the academic voice to, e.g., a pedagogical voice). Yet another way is to reduce both the content *and* choose a different form, condensing and rephrasing in a different voice.

This seems like an obvious thing to say, but it isn't exactly clear the extent to which a change in form affect what is being understood. However, it does affect the circulation of the content(as illustrated by countless waves of A/B testing)! The way things sound, or the kind of topic they gravitate around, makes them more memorable and more shareable. In our case, the example of lolmythesis, a one-line summary of theses across the world, makes the case for the memetic value of shortening and rephrasing research.

In any case, we can start from the fact that *abstracting* is not the only approach to interfacing a dense, if not always complex, scientific work. The abstract compresses knowledge from the rest of the paper, but barely changes its form. In doing so, it sidesteps the fact that it might actually be this kind of form which is a barrier to entry in the first place! It also removes it from contextualized existence, assuming that the academic context in which it circulates is the only context, and so forgets that any address involves an addressee, whom might or might not share the same interpretative codes (a.k.a. not everyone you're talking to knows what you're talking about). Sticking to a writing style resulting from collective agreement results in a de-personalizing process. The resulting text could have been written by anyone, at any point in time, and about anything, presenting scientific findings as "*a view from nowhere*".

Even if style has not been a thoroughly-explored aspect of doing science, it is nonetheless an unavoidable part of human experience: style is how you do something. Just as with politics, having no style is already having a style.

One of the questions of style, is whether it is a individual marker or a collective endeavour, whether it is about personal, idiosyncratic expression or collective, standardized communication. But this does not need to be so binary. We can also take the perspective of style as reconciling the individual with the collective. By clearly acknowledging a style effect, this "irreductible superfluous" which accompanies any human creation and which we can never get rid of, we also recognize the subjectivities involved in the creation of scientific outputs (researchers are human too!). In so doing, it's also acknowledging the existence of a desynchronized yet, very real reader, another human who's a part of the broader social circle in which a discourse circulates. A style can thus be about a personality addressing a public, rather than a personality isolated from, or submerged into, a group.

Style is "the relation of the lived experience to the structures which objectivize it". It's the spice within the expected behaviour, the little something which makes it relatable. By doing that, it also carries meaning in itself. Through context and grounding, it shows allegiance to certain things: belonging to a genre, belonging to a value system, and even belonging to a lineage of socio-political histories.

Why isn't talking about serious things in a banal way considered the proper thing to do (especially in university?)? Or the respectful thing to do? Perhaps because it does imply a shift in values, a loss of reverence for the authority of proper academic writing; yet, it might be overlooked that it also implies a shift in audiences. Lose some, win some, as they say.

Ultimately, then, representing text not as an abstract but as a tl;dr is about leaving behind a strict structure impersonally aimed at a restricted group of peers, about heading into a shameless loose rephrasing because both writers and readers are humans after all.

So where do we go from here? The rest of this publication includes a short guide and a few examples on how to tl;dr a piece of science, preparing it to roam freely across discursive circles.

References

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- [Essai d'une philosophie du style](#), Gilles Gaston-Granger, Odile Jacob, 1988.
  A serious inquisition into what style in science is

- [La Distinction: Critique sociale du Jugement](#), Pierre Bourdieu, Les Éditions de Minuit, 1979.
  In which style is also seen as a sociological marker

- [The Problem of Style](#), Georg Simmel, Theory, Culture and Society, SAGE Journals, vol. 8, 1991.
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- [Fun to Imagine](#), Richard Feynman, BBC, 1983.
  A lovely example of re-presenting science in vernacular terms

- [The view from nowhere](#), Thomas Nagel, Oxford University Press, 1989.
  A useful contribution on the "objective" perspective from which sciences establishes its discourse.

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  A linguistic theory that relies on dialogue and exchange as its fundamental grounding

TL;DRs
Real-world specimens

computers can make up worlds and sometimes we believe they're real

Basically, the idea was to show that there are some similarities between political science and game design. In both cases, you're setting up rules for people to do stuff. But the plot twist is that, with computer games, the computer also creates a full dynamic simulation of a world (like suburbia in The Sims). And simulations is a special kind of representation: it evolves by itself! And that gives it a special persuasive power.

Pierre Depaz, *computer simulations as political manifestos*

https://hal.science/hal-04276949

the same tech applied to different things is not the same tech

I was curious about the question of whether technology is independent of the social environment in which it exists (like, does it have a life of itself, or is the context stronger?). So I wanted to test the comparison: there's two projects, that use the same kind of tech (a sort of blockchain), but they come from relatively different communities (start-up boys vs. tech hippies). And turns out there is a difference! In this case, the social context affects what kind of entity the technology is applied to (start-up boys apply the blockchain to objects, hippies apply the blockchain to humans). And this, in turn, limits what you can do with the tech.

Pierre Depaz, *Critiques protocolaires d'Internet: comparaison des projets IPFS et SecureScuttleButt*

https://hal.science/hal-04421591

we can argue about something but technology does the thing (and makes the argument pointless)

I was interested in style, particularly in whether its personal (like in arts) or collective (like in sociology). Taking the case of programming, it's a nice in-between: you work alone on collaborative projects. So I was curious how do programmers negotiate which style to use! There's a bunch of different arguments, but the one that I found the most interesting is that there is automated software to make your code in a certain style, and that argument (because it actually does what it says!) is more effective than the others. Made me think of what other kinds of argument software can make.

Pierre Depaz, *Discursive Strategies in Style Guides Negotiation on GitHu*

https://hal.science/hal-04366323

programmers are like architects except they have nothing to refer to

This is just a side paper I was writing when I was doing my PhD. Basically it's about the parallels that can be drawn between building software and building buildings (i.e. programmers vs. architects), in terms of knowledge transfer, and in terms of appreciating the nice things they made. The problem with knowledge transfer is that a building is always visible and so you can learn by example. Not so much with code. It was also an attempt to look into the concept of craft a bit more, and how craft is not so much about a thing, but about a way of doing things.

Pierre Depaz, *The craft of code*

https://hal.science/hal-04365925

online political videos really work when you bring them offline

I co-wrote this one with Pauline Donizeau, and we were wondering how activists use social media during the arab spring in Egypt. The cool things we found is that, while social media is good for coordination and bypassing official media (often corrupted lol), the campaigns are most effective when you take these alternative videos countering the official narrative and you project them in the streets! I wonder how it would work now, since a lot more people have smartphones and would just look at the video by themselves, or share it in restricted whatsapp groups. That does say something about the importance of public viewings as political devices, imo.

Pierre Depaz, Pauline Donizeau, *L'agit-prop à l'ère 2.0: les campagnes du collectif Kazeboon dans l'Égypte en Révolution*

https://hal.science/hal-04276991

Do It Yourself!

How-to write a TL;DR and shine on the internet

TL;DR

Think of the tl;dr as a punchline.

Not subtle, but effective, and memorable. At first, the impact matters more than the subtlety but, if you pay a bit of attention to it, the punchline can become an elegant aphorism, compression a lot of insight into a couple of words.

Here are some tips to keep in mind:

1. Don't overthink it.
2. Don't be afraid to be funny or quirky. People remember it better than long demonstrations.
3. Remember that you are someone, and that you are talking to someone. It's ok to use personal pronouns (me/you/etc.)
4. Remember that this someone might be tired. Make things easy for them.
5. People pay attention when they get *why* they should pay attention. Be direct and involve what's at stake.
6. Avoid technical terms.

You can scribble your TL;DRs on the following blank pages, and/or upload them at tldr.science.

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TL;DR

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TL;DR

Do It Yourself!

Colophon

Put together by Pierre Depaz for the DIY Research Methods 2024 <https://diymethods.net>, also existing online at <tldr.science>.

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