

Writing business research article abstracts: A genre approach

Carmen Piqué-Noguera

Universitat de València (Spain)

carmen.pique@uv.es

Abstract

A great deal has been published about oral and written genres in business (e.g., letters, research articles, oral presentations, etc.), and less attention has been paid to business research article abstracts as a written genre, as many experts would argue. This research intends to raise rhetorical awareness about the role of abstracts in today's academic world. To this effect, the abstracts of two official publications of the Association of Business Communication, *Journal of Business Communication* and *Business Communication Quarterly*, have been analyzed and compared in terms of structure and content according to models published in the specialized literature. The results show an irregular and inconsistent presentation of abstracts, a good number of them following no set pattern and thus lacking in important information for researchers. These findings suggest, first of all, that abstracts have a specific mission to fulfil and should not be disregarded; and, secondly, that journal guidelines for authors should be more explicit in their instructions on how to write and structure abstracts.

Keywords: genre analysis, business writing, abstracts, structure, lexical patterns.

Resumen

Cómo escribir resúmenes en artículos de investigación sobre negocios: un enfoque de género

Se ha publicado mucho acerca de los géneros orales y escritos en los negocios (cartas, artículos de investigación, presentaciones orales, etc.) y menos atención se ha prestado a los resúmenes de los artículos de investigación en los negocios como género escrito, según manifiestan los expertos. En este trabajo se pretende aumentar la concienciación retórica sobre la función del resumen en el mundo

académico de hoy. Para ello, se han analizado y comparado los resúmenes de dos revistas oficiales de la Asociación sobre la Comunicación Empresarial (*Association of Business Communication*), *Journal of Business Communication* y *Business Communication Quarterly*, en cuanto a estructura y contenido, según los modelos publicados en la literatura especializada. Los resultados ponen de manifiesto una presentación inconsistente e irregular de los resúmenes, muchos de ellos sin seguir un patrón prefijado y, por lo tanto, carentes de información importante para los investigadores. Estos resultados sugieren, en primer lugar, que los resúmenes tienen una función específica que cumplir y que no deberían menospreciarse y, en segundo, que las normas de publicación deberían ser más explícitas en cuanto a sus instrucciones sobre cómo escribir y estructurar los resúmenes.

Palabras clave: análisis de género, escribir en los negocios, resúmenes, estructura, modelos léxicos.

Introduction

Although written genres have been the target of scholars for a long time (Bazerman, 1988; Swales, 1990; Bhatia, 1993; Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995, to name but a few), some genres seem to have received more attention than others. Abstracts, as a genre (Lorés, 2004; Samraj, 2005; Gillaerts & Van de Velde, 2010), are an indispensable tool for researchers in the selection of papers which may be relevant to them in their research projects. The specialized literature, however, has not delved so much into them, even though they play such an important role in the researchers' written activity in their access to abstracting journals, online databases, and the like. In one of his early papers, Swales (1984: 78) already said that "the abstract (...) of a journal article must compete for the attention of a busy readership". In spite of such awareness, as Swales claimed, abstracts "continue to remain a neglected field among discourse analysts" (1990: 181). In addition, in his book *Research Genres*, he still contended that abstracts were "unfinished business" (Swales, 2004: 239) in genre research, although he cited the research on abstracts carried out by Hartley and Hyland. This alleged neglect may also be attributed to assuming that writing an abstract is a relatively easy task compared to writing a research article (RA). An abstract should not be considered just as an attached note to the research paper, but as a genre in its own right. Even when derived from and sharing similar features of the paper, abstracts have their own rhetorical structure and their role is different. However, as Swales and Feak (2010) have recently argued, during the first

five years of this century, the situation has changed considerably and numerous investigations have been carried out on abstracts. In addition, and from a pedagogical point of view, their book (Swales & Feak, 2009) and online commentary (Swales, Irwin & Feak, 2009) are a reflection that abstracts are not to be disregarded; through their comments an effort is made to raise rhetorical awareness about the role of abstracts (Perales-Escudero & Swales, 2011).

Nevertheless, business communicators contend that writing in business lacks research, “particularly in one of the main areas that seems to define [their] discipline – genres of organizational writing” (Amidon, 2008: 452). Even when new research ideas and propositions are brought forward, business writers have been known to go somewhat for free. As Thomas (1999: 40) explained, “business writers instinctively stretch and often ignore accepted rules and guidelines for business writing”. This is one of the reasons why Amidon (2008: 452), quoting from the literature, emphasizes that business communication is “in sore need of more research” through which a research identity can be established. Most teachers of business and technical writing are fully aware of the students’ needs and how they should distinguish between class assignments and workplace needs (Kreth, 2005; also Seifert, 2009), concentrating on various business genres, such as emails, memos, letters, reports, etc. (Andrews & Henze, 2009), or on institutional discourse (Lammers, 2011). Nevertheless, not enough attention is placed on other aspects of writing, such as writing for publication and most particularly writing abstracts, as editorialized by Hernon and Schwartz (2010).

Therefore, the aim of this paper is to see to what extent RA abstracts published in two major business journals comply with the so-called “acceptable abstract” and whether or not published abstracts provide the necessary information to satisfy both writers and researchers. Basically the aim of this research is to answer questions like the following: Does abstract size significantly affect its aim of providing necessary information to researchers? If so, are structured abstracts the answer? Do the abstracts in the two corpora provide the so-called adequate information to accurately represent the RAs they announce? Is the choice of certain textual patterns an indication of abstract moves?

Review of the literature

Most of the early literature on abstracts was on how to write and present adequate information in unstructured abstracts, as publications by Borko and Chatman (1963), or Dronberger and Kowitz (1975), among others, show. In the next decades, however, authors basically aimed at providing guidelines for indexing and abstracting, such as Cremmins (1982) and Lancaster (1991); they wrote extensive treatises on the subject distinguishing between indicative and informative abstracts. Broadly speaking, the indicative abstract usually presents a Background and a Purpose, but either the Methodology, or the Results, or both, are normally omitted, whereas the informative abstract usually contains Background, Purpose, Methodology, Results, and Conclusion, representing what is found in the RA. A third category, the indicative-informative abstract, can be established, which is a combination of both, often represented by an indicative abstract to which a Methodology or a Conclusion has been added (ANSI/NISO, 1997).

During the 80s and early 90s, and basically in medical publications, the debate centered on the issue of whether an abstract should be just a plain paragraph –what authors referred to as an “acceptable abstract” (Borko & Chatman, 1963: 149) –, or an abstract with subheadings for its main moves. An “acceptable abstract” entails an internal structure through which the necessary information for the readership is provided, while in structured abstracts the structure is shown through external (visible) subheadings (Piqué-Angordans & Piqué-Noguera, 2010). What was at stake, however, was what authors understood by necessary information and how it should be expressed. Most authors would recommend that abstracts should be informative, with the basic informational content of the paper, rather than indicative, providing only the gist of the article or bringing the readers’ attention to important publications.

Medical journal authors, instead of pursuing this informative-indicative debate, began to write about the convenience of adopting structured abstracts for their papers (Ad Hoc Working Group, 1987; Huth, 1987). In 1991, the June 26 issue of *The Journal of the American Medical Association* published its first structured abstract, although the rest of the articles in that issue presented unstructured abstracts. Structured abstracts were soon used in most medical publications and related disciplines (pharmacology, biochemistry, biology, and the like) and they also began to be employed in social sciences (Hartley, 1997 & 2003; Hartley & Benjamin, 1998; Ufnalska

& Hartley, 2009). To this author's knowledge, the only important business-related journals which include structured abstracts in their RAs are being published, since 2006, by the Emerald group, with seven subheadings (four mandatory and three optional).

The inattention to the writing of abstracts in business does not imply that they were a totally forgotten genre among business professionals, especially among teaching professionals. As early as 1966, Staiger wrote about how writing business abstracts could ensure better communication with readers and gave a few clues for students about abstract writing, because he favored author-written abstracts, and held the abstract as being a vital link between the author and the audience (Staiger, 1966: 29). In the mid 80s the Association of Business Communication, through two of its official publications, the *Journal of Business Communication* (JBC) and the *Business Communication Quarterly* (BCQ), became very active in the promotion of business writing and communication among teachers and students. Of special significance was Kellner's (1982)¹ paper in which teacher competence was questioned and emphasis was placed on the degeneration of technical writing. To this effect, Roundy (1982), as well as Baxter and Clark (1982), in the same issue of the BCQ, wrote about teaching abstracts, how to write them, and how they should include specific information, in addition to how the structure of an abstract should have a relationship with the document it represents. Since then, almost every issue of the BCQ included two or three papers advocating writing courses to meet the needs of professionals in business, but seldom on how to structure and write abstracts. More recently, the awareness of students' writing needs in business has produced literature basically aimed at the promotion of writing across the curriculum (see Russell, 2007, among others). Nevertheless, the specific study of abstracts in business has been practically inexistent.

The traditional research article abstract

As said above, the traditional one-paragraph unstructured abstract² is supposed to contain a detectable internal structure. The literature provides sufficient evidence to the fact that, as Gillaerts and Van de Velde (2010) have pointed out, RA abstracts are a well-established genre among academics. The question, however, remains as to whether a research paper abstract "functions as a condensed reproduction of the text or rather as an expansion of the title, as well as the question of whether it is an indicator of the RA's

content or rather an informative summary” (Gillaerts & Van de Velde, 2010: 128). Notwithstanding anything to the contrary of this assertion, the literature needs to clarify, at least in several disciplines, the function and content of abstracts, which still demands further research on the subject (Swales, 2004; also Hartley, 2003; Kitchenham et al., 2008; and Ufnalska & Hartley, 2009, to name but a few).

The definition of the American National Standards Institute and the National Information Standards Organization (ANSI/NISO, 1997: 1), in their revision of the ANSI Z39.14-1979 guidelines approved in January 1971, was no more explicit than the previous ones: “the term *abstract* signifies a brief, objective representation of the contents of a primary document or an oral presentation” (authors’ italics). This document, while advising not to confuse the term “abstract” with related but distinct terms, such as “annotation”, “extract”, “summary”, and “synoptic”, clearly distinguished two main types of abstracts, indicative and informative, “reflecting the mode or perspective in which they are written” (ANSI/NISO, 1997: 3). Most importantly, the document emphasized that “[b]oth types of abstracts should present as much as possible of the essential information contained in the text” (ANSI/NISO, 1997: 3).

Style guides consider abstracts of a special importance; the APA Publication Manual (2010: 26), for instance, says that “[a] well-prepared abstract can be the most important single paragraph in an article”. This manual understands an abstract of an empirical study as being composed of one single paragraph containing four major components, which have remained unchanged since the 1994 edition, the first of which is often subdivided into two different components:

- i. Problem, purpose or aim of the research, background or focus of study,
- ii. Method (e.g., data-gathering procedures, intervention, research design, sample description),
- iii. Findings, and
- iv. Conclusions/implications/recommendations.

To give response to the early proposals, especially since Borko and Chatman (1963: 150) who wrote that it was “generally agreed that abstracts should include the four main topics (purpose, methods, results, and conclusions)”,

Bhatia (1993) suggested four different questions to be answered through the contents of the abstract: What the author did; How the author did it; What the author found; and What the author concluded.

The intention of this research is not to propose that structured abstracts would best suit the needs of authors in their “marketization” effort to convince readers to read their papers, but rather to emphasize that unstructured abstracts can also be convincing enough, provided they contain adequate information. Similarly, both Weissberg and Buker (1990) and Hyland (2000) offered a five-move structure condensed in a single paragraph.

It is widely acknowledged that abstracts are often a reflection of the RAs in their IMRD pattern for Introduction, Methodology, Results, and Discussion. Weissberg and Buker (1990), however, subdivided the first of these moves into two different issues: first, introducing some background information to the study and, second, declaring the main activity of the research, or the statement of purpose, as well as the scope of the research. Thus, their ideal abstract (in Table 1) would have the following five-move structure:

ORDER OF TYPICAL ELEMENTS INCLUDED IN AN ABSTRACT	
B	= some <i>background information</i>
P	= the <i>principal activity</i> (or purpose) of the study and its <i>scope</i>
M	= some information about the <i>methodology</i> used in the study
R	= the most important <i>results</i> of the study
C	= a statement of <i>conclusion</i> or <i>recommendation</i>

Table 1. Classification of rhetorical moves (Weissberg & Buker, 1990: 186).

Hyland (2000), who studied 800 abstracts from various disciplines, among them marketing, postulated that “writers use this genre to typically situate themselves and their work in their disciplines” (ibid., p. 63). He analyzed his corpus based on the abstract structure shown in Table 2, similar to Weissberg and Buker’s (1990: 186):

Move	Function
Introduction	Establishes context of the paper and motivates the research or discussion.
Purpose	Indicates purpose, thesis or hypothesis, outlines the intention behind the paper.
Method	Provides information on design, procedures, assumptions, approach, data, etc.
Product	States main findings or results, the argument, or what was accomplished.
Conclusions	Interprets or extends results beyond scope of paper, draws inferences, points to applications or wider implications.

Table 2. Classification of rhetorical moves (Hyland, 2000: 67).

In this structure, Hyland proposed an Introduction where the context of the paper and also the motivation behind the research are given (that is, Background, in Weissberg & Buker's (1990) structure). The aim of this Introduction or Background is typically to situate the author's research; that is, they both serve a similar rhetorical function (Samraj, 2005). The abstract, in any case, should not only comply with these or similar specifications, but should also be persuasive enough to encourage the reader that the article is worth reading and perhaps even using and citing it (Hernon & Schwartz, 2010).

Corpus description and methodology

The corpus is composed of 80 abstracts from the *Journal of Business Communication* (JBC) and 80 abstracts from the *Business Communication Quarterly* (BCQ), official publications of the Association of Business Communication, both peer-reviewed and with a long tradition among business professionals, even though the BCQ originally was a newsletter. The abstracts have been taken from the first two full articles published in every issue of the journal from 2001 through 2010. In the case of BCQ, some issues contained only one paper with abstract; in this case, other issues were examined to obtain an equal number of abstracts per journal. Having in mind the inherent difficulty in the discrimination of move boundaries and following the ANSI/NISO (1997) directives, abstracts were initially classified as follows: in JBC, 54 were informative abstracts, 23 were indicative, and 3 were indicative-informative, whereas in BCQ, 36 were classified as informative, 34 as indicative, and 11 as indicative-informative.

In the preparation and analysis of the corpora, Scott's (2009) software package *WordSmith Tools*, v. 5, was used for the statistical analysis – number and type of words, type-token ratios, words per sentence and per abstract, and standard deviation (SD) –, to draw some concordances, and so on. For this reason, the texts have been downloaded from each journal's archive and later manually tagged for the different calculations that followed, basically for mean sentence length and mean paragraph length. The analysis will basically concentrate on an external view of the structure of abstracts in terms of move presence in the two corpora. However, the importance of semantics will also be studied through the analysis of specific terminology and textual patterns in each move, such as reporting verbs, collocations, nominalizations, and specific noun phrases.

In spite of possible drawbacks in the corpora under study, some important inferences can be drawn which may help both writers and their editors to be more conscious about the information that should be included in this important genre. As Hyland (2000: 63) commented, this genre is “critical to disciplinary knowledge-making and therefore to the work of academics”. However, contrary to what is usually done in medical journals, the journals analyzed rarely provide guidelines as to how an abstract should be written, what information should be included therein, and what its structure should look like. Both journals provide information about the number of words per abstract in their guidelines for authors (150 words or fewer) and that it should be informative, but none is given about its contents. Additionally, both journals recommend the use of the APA writing style; therefore, their abstract should reflect the one proposed in the APA Publication Manual (2010), mentioned above.

Results and analysis of results

Basic data analysis

Table 3 presents the basic statistics of the two corpora drawn through Scott’s (2009) software package *WordSmith Tools*.

	80 abstracts from JBC (2001-2010)	80 abstracts from BCQ (2001-2010)
Tokens (running words)	10,966	9,261
Type-token ratio (TTR)	22.26	23.16
No. of sentences	452	378
Mean sentence length	24.26	24.50
Standard deviation	10.11	11.74
Paragraphs	80	80
Mean (of words) per paragraph	137.07	115.76
Standard deviation (SD)	29.83	29.36

Table 3. Basic statistics of JBC and BCQ corpora.

These quantitative data provide, first of all, an approximation into the lexical density of abstracts, especially the type-token ratio (TTR). Authors have proposed different measures for capturing the richness of vocabulary, and it is one of the elements to consider in analyzing the text used in abstracts. TTR is a measure of vocabulary diversity in a written text by addressing text “repetitiveness”. The score means that a high TTR has a low rate of

repetition, while a low score indicates a higher rate of repetition, that is, fewer types of words being used.

Sentence length results are also a good indication of clarity and intelligibility of texts. They remain within the limits of academic writing in general, and are associated with what is considered appropriate academic style; the results obtained (24.26 and 24.50 words per sentence in the two journals studied, Table 3) are consistent with previous research. MacDonald (1990), for example, contends that academic writing is characterized by an average of 23.26 words per sentence. According to her, the readability of a sentence is usually affected in a negative way by an excessive clause length and also by unnecessary nominalization. The nature of abstracts, whose authors tend to limit themselves to adjust to the journal's limitation on the number of words, allows for few subordinate clauses, a limitation that also affects nominalization. As MacDonald (1990) suggests, longer-than-average sentences are likely to contain more nominalizations, as they involve more complex transformation. Thus, she recommends using a verbal rather than a nominal style.

Another feature to consider is the number of words per abstract. Although both journals studied would accept abstracts of up to 150 words, their average per abstract often remains below that number, which indicates that more information could have been included in their abstracts had authors wished to do so. Nevertheless, there is a wide variability in abstract size: 58 abstracts in JBC and 72 in BCQ are below the 150-word mark suggested by the authors' guidelines; their average size is 137.07 words per abstract in the case of JBC and a significant reduction in the case of BCQ with a total of 115.76 words per abstract. The standard deviation (SD) of 29.83 and 29.36, respectively, responds to the observed variability in abstract size. However, the number of words per abstract, in most cases, does not appear to be proportional to the amount of information provided. For example, while in abstract BCQ-65, a 150-word-long paragraph, only two moves can be clearly detected (B and R, as explained in Table 1), in the 53-word abstract BCQ-45, four different moves (P, M, R, and C, as explained in Table 1) can be identified. In the same research mentioned, Hartley and Betts (2009: 2014) gave an average length of 148.47 words per abstract (SD 40.38). They directly related the abstract's word limitation to their content and information scores; this difference, however, was inexistent when comparing the information provided in abstracts limited to 150 words with abstracts limited to 500 words, especially when making reference to the information provided in the three main moves of the abstract (P, M, and R).

Abstract move analysis

In most journals, the lack of information in authors' guidelines, as to what abstracts should contain, most certainly contributes to their information variability. Even though in some abstracts the move discrimination carried out may be questioned, due to the fact that some moves appear embedded in others, the results obtained, following Weissberg and Buker's (1990) structural model of analysis, are shown in Table 4.

	B	P	M	R	C
JBC	43	77	70	73	49
BCQ	54	57	44	65	29

Table 4. Data obtained from JBC and BCQ in totals.

From the statistical point of view, and through the SPSS Statistics 19.0 software package calculations, the χ^2 values of the data on Table 4 show no statistical significance. This information load, expressed in percentages, is visually represented in Figure 1.

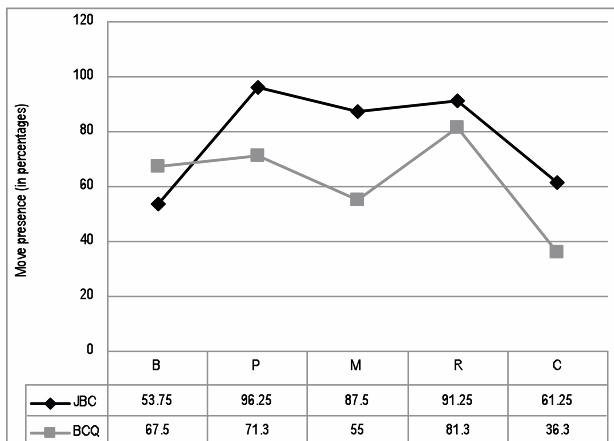


Figure 1. Graphic representation of move presence in abstracts from the two journals.

It is obvious that in terms of total figures (Table 4), as well as percentages (Figure 1), JBC presents a more complete set of information in abstracts, especially in the three main moves (P, M, and R) with 96.25%, 87.50%, and

91.25%, respectively. BCQ shows a significant reduction in the information: B and P are around 70%, and only R is above 80%. In their analysis of weaknesses in traditional abstracts in the social sciences, Hartley and Betts (2009) reported that academic writing contained information about the same main moves with the following percentages: Aims, 79%; Method and Results, 86%; they noted, however, that other information related to number, age and sex of participants, as well as the place where the research was carried out, had very low percentages. Background and Conclusions had both 57%. In other disciplines, however, the Purpose move (Aims) had the highest rate; for example, new technology and higher education had 96% and 97%, respectively.

Reporting verbs and other textual patterns as move indicators

Research on abstracts is not simply a description of their structure and contents. How one intends to convey these contents has a significant bearing on the choice of words, especially certain reporting verbs, nominalizations, textual patterns, and the like. One of the difficulties in the interpretation of abstracts and their move discrimination is related to the attribution of certain reporting verbs and verb combinations as pointers of specific moves. Some of them are readily distinguishable, but the use made by the abstract's author does not always correspond to each move's defining characteristics.

The number of abstracts selected for this research may not portray a representative enough picture of how a reporting verb is used in a given move, but some useful indications can be drawn. Through the frequency list in *WordSmith Tools*, seven of the most frequently used reporting verbs have been extracted from each corpus; a number of coincidences confirm the specific use of some of them in a given move, as shown in Table 5.

As the table shows, some verbs are specifically designed and used for a specific move within the abstract. Most significant are “find” (86.66% in JBC and 85.72% in BCQ) and “show” (94.12% and 60.00%, respectively) in the Results move with high percentages in both journals well above the rest of moves. “Suggest” and “discuss” are also two significant verbs used in the Conclusion move, although “suggest” (64.29% in JBC and 47.06% in BCQ) may offer an added difficulty because it is also used, although less frequently, in Results, especially in JBC (25.00%).

Reporting verbs	n (%)	B	P	M	R	C	
<i>use</i>	JBC	43 (100)	4 (9.30)	2 (4.65)	22 (51.17)	13 (30.23)	2 (4.65)
	BCQ	45 (100)	7 (15.56)	7 (15.56)	11 (24.44)	16 (35.56)	4 (8.88)
<i>suggest</i>	JBC	28 (100)	3 (10.71)	0	0	7 (25.00)	18 (64.29)
	BCQ	17 (100)	3 (17.65)	2 (11.76)	1 (5.88)	3 (17.65)	8 (47.06)
<i>examine</i>	JBC	27 (100)	0	20 (74.08)	6 (22.22)	0	1 (3.70)
	BCQ	12 (100)	1 (8.33)	7 (58.34)	3 (25.00)	0	1 (8.33)
<i>show</i>	JBC	17 (100)	0	1 (5.88)	0	16 (94.12)	0
	BCQ	10 (100)	4 (40.00)	0	0	6 (60.00)	0
<i>find</i>	JBC	15 (100)	1 (6.67)	0	0	13 (86.66)	1 (6.67)
	BCQ	14 (100)	1 (7.14)	0	0	12 (85.72)	1 (7.14)
<i>discuss</i>	JBC	11 (100)	0	1 (9.09)	0	3 (27.27)	7 (63.64)
	BCQ	11 (100)	1 (9.09)	2 (18.18)	2 (18.18)	1 (9.09)	5 (45.46)
<i>demonstrate</i>	JBC	12 (100)	1 (8.33)	3 (25.00)	0	6 (50.00)	2 (16.67)
	BCQ	10 (100)	1 (10.00)	3 (30.00)	0	6 (60.00)	0

Table 5. Most frequent reporting verbs used in both corpora in total numbers (n) and percentages (%).

While no specific verb is consistently used in the Background move, in which the topic of the paper or a reflection on previous research are usually introduced whenever this move is present in the abstract, the Purpose move becomes identifiable because of the use of verbs like “examine”: of the 27 appearances of this verb in the 80 abstracts, 20 (74.08%) of them are present in the Purpose move in JBC, while 7 out of 12 (58.33%) in BCQ, and most particularly with the use of noun phrases, as can be seen in the examples. Results such as these are particularly useful for the training of future academics on how to write an abstract.

The presence of a specific verb or verbal phrase in the Methodology move is usually not so obvious, unless specifically mentioning the research sample studied, or the procedure employed in the research, as specified by Bhatia (1993: 79), “[i]n this move the author gives a good indication of the experimental design, including information on the data, procedures or

method(s) used and, if necessary, the scope of the research being reported”. Thus, depending on the writing of this move, several verbs can be resorted to, but the verb “use” (n = 22 of 43; that is, 51.17%) in JBC is most frequent. In BCQ it is more evenly distributed among the different moves: of the 45 utterances of the verb “use”, 16 (35.56%) appear under the Results move, and 11 (24.44%) under the Methodology move (example 2), a sentence in which this move (M) is combined with Purpose. Although not listed in Table 5, the verb “analyze” is present on 13 occasions in JBC, of which 9 (69.23%) are used in the passive voice (example 3), also a typical verb form in the Methodology section of RAs. This verb “analyze” is not as common in BCQ with only 4 appearances. See examples of these two verbs:

- (1) The second study *uses* an ethnographic approach, contextual inquiry (CI), to examine 18 subjects’ use of printed and online documentation in context. (JBC-6)
- (2) In this article, [M] we *use* a commercially available assessment [P] to investigate the relationship between information literacy and the key business communication skill of business writing. (BCQ-75; move indicators have been added)
- (3) Documents *were analyzed* through multiple passes for identifiable linguistic and rhetorical patterns ... (JBC-34)

While the Methodology move does not carry many specific terms that would clearly signal a move the way Purpose often does, Results can also be easily identified, especially when using verbs like “find” and “show”, as examples (4) and (5), respectively, illustrate:

- (4) Student-perceived improvements *were found* in all categories, with the largest improvement in public speaking anxiety. (BCQ-3)
- (5) The results *showed* that participants agree strongly with respect to whether a work of art was aligned with a specific identity. (JBC-37)

While reporting verbs appear to be important, especially in Results and Conclusion moves, Purpose displays another characteristic in terms of textual patterns which appear regularly in this move. The presence of these patterns in abstracts makes this move most easily identifiable. They are usually composed of a reporting verb preceded by a noun phrase in

expressions such as: “This paper”, “This study”, “This research”, and similar, as subject of the sentence, plus a verb like “investigates”, “reports”, “explores”, and the like. This occurs on 58 occasions (that is, in 72.50% of the 80 JBC abstracts), 32 of them used as an abstract initiator (example 6). This format can also be found in BCQ, although less frequently: it appears on 29 occasions (i.e., in 36.25% of the 80 BCQ abstracts), 15 of them as abstract initiator. Example (7) is a sentence initiator but preceded by a Background move.

- (6) *This article explores* the functional elegance of direct mail as it constructs its target audience. (JBC-19)
- (7) *This study examines* how 115 executives in a distance-learning business communication class in Mexico used English to conduct business ... (BCQ-25)

Also a change of pattern format can be found in which the authors acquire a prominent position in the sentence, either by the use of the first person plural pronoun “we”, as in example (8), as a Purpose sentence, or the noun phrase “the authors”, as in example (9) used as Conclusion, both employed as subject of the sentence followed by a reporting verb:

- (8) *In this paper we argue* that cultural diversity can be advantageous or detrimental for organizations depending on organization members’ communication. (JBC-17)
- (9) *The authors conclude* that external stakeholders may enact many of the processes found in employee whistle-blowing ... (JBC-32)

The formula “The aim of this paper is/was”, or similar, does not appear as frequently as it could be expected, as in other journals, particularly in structured abstracts (for example, the journal *Management Research News* included structured abstracts in its RAs starting in 2006). Orasan (2001), for instance, reported the combined formula of “paper” plus verb on 499 occasions in his corpus of 473 artificial intelligence RA abstracts. In our corpora it appears twice in JBC (nos. 37 and 61, example 10) and 3 times in BCQ (nos. 26, 47, example 11, and 69):

- (10) *The aim of this article is* to illuminate the importance of voluntary disclosures as an aspect of corporate reporting ... (JBC-61)

- (11) *The purpose of this empirical study was to ascertain whether significant differences exist between faculty and student perceptions ... (BCQ-47)*

Nominalizations are also typically resorted to by abstract writers, aside from the typical nominalizations in specific academic prose. For example, the noun “findings” is typically present in the Results move, but it is also used in the Conclusion, often in combination with the verb “suggest”: of the 37 uses, 21 (11 in JBC and 10 in BCQ) belong to the Results move, while 10 are used in the Conclusion move (7 and 3, respectively). Likewise, the term itself “results” also promotes a certain number of phrases which are usually indicative of that move.

Of the 21 instances of the noun “findings” in JBC, 12 appear combined with a reporting verb, as the following collocations in Table 6 indicate (the left column indicates abstract move).

move	no.	Collocations
C	1	making. The <u>findings</u> <u>suggest</u> the necessity of training team me
R	2	vironments. <u>Findings</u> of an exploratory empirical study <u>show</u> th
R	3	ization. The <u>findings</u> do not <u>support</u> the view that the frequent
R	4	brands. The <u>findings</u> <u>demonstrate</u> how analysis of corporate de
C	5	s discourse. <u>Findings</u> of this study <u>suggest</u> that professionals o
R	6	t decisions. <u>Findings</u> <u>reveal</u> both the existence of shared mindf
C	7	n. Thus, the <u>findings</u> <u>provide</u> strong support for use of soft inf
R	8	tion tactics. <u>Findings</u> <u>indicate</u> that the perception of time as sc
C	9	ers. Further <u>findings</u> <u>suggest</u> that organizational members hold
R	10	In addition, <u>findings</u> <u>revealed</u> how employees framed circumv
C	11	etence. Our <u>findings</u> <u>suggest</u> that the conversation style differ
R	12	sector. The <u>findings</u> <u>show</u> that, in the 21 st century, English has

Table 6. Instances of “Findings” + reporting verb collocations from the JBC corpus.

In the following 5 samples from BCQ (Table 7) the word “findings” appears combined with 5 different verbs:

move	no.	Collocations
R	1	States. Their <u>findings</u> <u>highlight</u> several cross-disciplinary comm
R	2	leaners. The <u>findings</u> <u>reveal</u> differences not only between ESL I
R	3	rojects. The <u>findings</u> <u>demonstrate</u> that such an approach enable
C	4	work. Our <u>findings</u> <u>indicate</u> that project management tools en
C	5	ation. These <u>findings</u> <u>caused</u> the authors to rethink what they ha

Table 7. Instances of “Findings” + reporting verb collocations from the BCQ corpus.

The last move, Conclusion, pretends to be a closing sentence or sentences to the abstract, similar to the use of the verb “suggest” (collocations 1, 5, 9, and

11 in Table 6). Similarly, with the verb “conclude” (example 9), although it only appears four times in JBC, and once in BCQ.

Weissberg and Buker (1990) also pointed out that in the Discussion section of the RA four information elements are often found: explanations, implications, limitations, or applications of the findings. According to them, through these nominalizations, the researcher usually takes position. Lischinsky (2008) also interpreted nominalizations such as these as instances of the author’s persuasive arguments, which stem from the argumentative structure of the RA.

In the analysis of the Conclusion of the abstract, some of these nominalizations, which are directly related to the discussion/conclusion of the RA, can also be visualized. This is especially detected when one comes across expressions related to “implications” (17 instances in JBC and 8 in BCQ), as in examples 12 and 13. The nominalization “suggestions”, which appears on 3 occasions in JBC (none in BCQ), is used in the same sentence (example 14) in combination with “implications”. Only one example of “limitations” indicating Conclusion (example 15) was found in the corpus, and also one instance of “explanations” (example 16).

- (12) ... and, furthermore, the results have both theoretical and practical *implications* for business communication scholars and professionals. (JBC-25)
- (13) The authors discuss their findings and offer *implications* for instructors and researchers in business education. (BCQ-61)
- (14) *Implications* for organizations and *suggestions* for training to reduce rater bias are discussed. (JBC-41)
- (15) *Limitations* and future possibilities for research are surveyed. (JBC-49)
- (16) An *explanation* for this result is provided by prospect theory, which predicts that framing financial performance in positive terms causes investors to think about the results in terms of increases relative to reference points. (JBC-63)

Orasan (2001), speaking of textual patterns in scientific abstracts, commented that the choice of specific verbs (like “examine”, “show”, or “find”) and noun phrases (like “This paper describes”, or “These findings

suggest”) in certain moves is not accidental, or a question of style, or the result of the author’s whim of using one verbal expression or another; many of these verbs and phrases represent clear formulae which are specific for abstract writing and for concrete moves within the abstract in order to provide an effective rendering of the contents of the paper.

Discussion and conclusion

Although many papers have been written on abstracts in the last ten years, very few of them have addressed this genre in its business perspective, a scarcity which is what prompted this research. Additionally, the fact that business professionals themselves (Thomas, 1999; Amidon, 2008) have claimed that there is an urgent need for writing guidelines in these disciplines, has also added another motivation. Recent research, however, is beginning to fill this gap in.

The significance of writing a good abstract has been underscored by the literature. Hyland (2001) insists that academic research possibly has multiple audiences, such as specialists, practitioners, students, lay people, and interested members of the discipline. In fact, Hyland (2001: 551) “sees writer-reader relationships as central to academic writing because it highlights the dialogic role of discourse in predicting a reader’s reaction and in responding to a larger textual conversation among members of a disciplinary community”. The audience is indeed the specific target of abstracts and, as such, these should be adaptable to individual situations and exigencies of the discipline involved. Thus, as the APA Publication Manual (2010: 26) reads, “[t]he abstract needs to be dense with information”, but it should also be “coherent and readable”.

The debate of abstract size vs. information has been brought up with the introduction of structured abstracts in several disciplines. While in medical journals this debate has already become past history, Hartley (1997) has raised the question in regard to the social sciences and other disciplines. The majority of business journal editors, however, do not seem to have taken this issue into consideration even though, as the literature shows, there is an obvious irregularity in the writing of abstracts both in terms of structure and content. The author believes that the question is not really a choice between structured or unstructured abstracts so long as the information included is adequate and responds to the contents of the RA. For this reason, authors

have proposed different structures, whether internal (unstructured abstracts) or external (structured abstracts), and all of them aimed at serving the same purpose; that is, to provide sufficient information to convince the reader to read the paper. The examples brought forward in this research should help students and junior writers to distribute the information in a coherent and orderly fashion using adequate textual patterns which in some way would better sell their product. If organized properly, as described above in the five-move model, there is enough room in a 150-word abstract to include the five moves which constitute an ideal abstract and still remain faithful to the so-called one paragraph abstract. With the abundance of papers published in today's world, most authors limit their initial research looking at titles and abstracts before choosing what RAs to acquire and read. Consequently, many potentially good articles are overlooked because their abstracts have been written carelessly. Hartley and Betts (2009: 2015) go right to the point when they write: "It is possible that more papers might be read in detail if the abstracts were more informative".

Another positive conclusion that can be drawn from this research is that prospective teachers and professionals will be made aware of the fact that writing an abstract is not something to be disregarded as a minor genre. This is partly the journal editors' job to make their prospective authors see this in its proper perspective. Hyland (2000) already pointed at some of its "marketing" characteristics. Professionals in the area of business, especially those involved in teaching and writing about theoretical issues, want their ideas and thoughts to be disseminated and made known to their discourse communities. This awareness will foster further research on how to better communicate in writing the investigation of business professionals.

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Carmen Piqué-Noguera is an Associate Professor in the Department of English and German Philology at the University of Valencia where she teaches English for Specific Purposes. Her main research interests include academic genre studies, and English-Chinese cross-cultural studies. She has co-authored the book *Escribir y publicar en Enfermería. Del trabajo escrito universitario al artículo de investigación* (Tirant Humanidades, 2011), and several journal articles on academic English.

NOTES

¹ Kellner's (1982) paper provoked a good deal of interest in academic writing and was granted an award of merit from the Society of Technical Communication. Although Kellner's paper was aimed at technical writing, BCQ's editor commented that "much of what professor Kellner says about the "mi-training" (or "untraining") of tech writing teachers might apply to business writing teachers also" (commentary extracted from the deepdive database, www.deepdive.com).

² In the corpus selected for this research, only three abstracts (JBC-1 and JBC-6, and BCQ-11) have been formatted as a two-paragraph abstract.