

Guidelines and model for the writing of abstracts

The difficulty in producing a good abstract lies in its brevity. The point is to achieve a reasonably comprehensive, critical summary with no words wasted. Your abstract may use up to 250 words. The sample following (for a book, but the principle for articles is essentially the same) uses 185.

Williams, Peter. *The Life of Bach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

This succinct book of 219 pages takes an unorthodox approach not only to Bach's life but also to biographical writing generally, seizing on the 1754 Obituary as the point of departure for the deconstruction of primary source evidence around the person and music of the composer. A careful reading of such evidence is necessary, since, among other things, "the few known facts . . . are constantly regurgitated" in standard biographical accounts in ways that reflect "an author's own preoccupations, which might well not be the composer's" (1). Williams retains the basic narrative account of Bach's life in seven chapters ("Early years, 1685-1703" through "Leipzig, the final years, and the first personal descriptions") while using the chronological structure to ask difficult yet relevant questions about the composer and his environment. The result is a portrait of Bach that seeks to overcome the "unremittingly reverential" (2) tone of earlier biographies, and that presents the reader with a balance of what is known and what can be intelligently conjectured. End materials include a helpful appendix of terms and a list of works discussed indexed by BWV number.

Note of the above:

... that it suggests some basic properties of the source ("succinct," "219 pages," how many chapters, how they are titled, that it has end material like helpful appendices and indices);

... that it gives an idea of the author's methodology (pushes off from the 1754 Obituary) and the significance of that methodology ("unorthodox," unlike "standard" accounts); and that it gives a glimpse of the author's own rationale for taking this approach;

... that, when it quotes (briefly!) from the book, it gives the page source as parenthetical reference;

... that it introduces some of the abstract writer's own opinion about the effectiveness of the source (it asks "difficult yet relevant questions," it "presents the reader with a balance");

... that it keeps to five sentences (3-5 is standard, though you may venture beyond; partial sentences are possible so long as the whole reads well);

... and that it *does not* repeat information already in the citation itself (it doesn't need to repeat the title of the book, and it doesn't even need to say directly that this is a biography, since this is implied in the title).