

31. **Shattering the Myths of Abstracts and Indexes**

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**Introduction**  
This exercise demonstrates the differences between abstracts and indexes and provides class time for students to discuss, evaluate and judge strengths and weaknesses of both tools. This exercise clearly demonstrates that abstracts and indexes are descriptive, not evaluative.

**Subject**  
Any

**Level of Activity**  
Basic

**Time Required**  
30–40 minutes

**Size of Class**  
No specific number of students required

**Preparation**  
1. Locate an article simultaneously indexed by an indexing service and a competitor's abstracting service OR abstracted by two separate abstracting services. Examples:
   - *ERIC* & *Psychological Abstracts*
   - *ERIC* & *Library Literature*
   - *MEDLINE* & *General Sciences Index*
   - *ABI-Inform* & *Business Periodicals Index*
   - *ABI-Inform* & *Predicasts*
   - *Sociological Abstracts* & *Social Sciences Index*

2. Reformat the entries from Source #1 and Source #2 so that they are side by side on a single sheet of paper. Label all of the field headings with their full names instead of abbreviations (authors, institutional affiliation, title of article, journal name, volume number, issue number, issue date, pagination, subject headings/descriptors, abstract). Keep a copy of this sheet for yourself as a master document.

3. Working with your reformatted version of Source #1, strip out the journal name, volume number, issue number, issue date and pagination, but keep the remaining information in place. From Source #2, strip out the authors, institutional affiliation, and the title of the article. Make sure that all of the respective field headings are in their proper places after making these cuts. You may want to use different type fonts to further distinguish the two bibliographic
entries, but keep the two entries side by side on the final document. The fact that both citations refer to the same article is hidden from the students. Do not include the names of the indexes on this handout. Refer to them only as Source #1 and Source #2. This will be the basis of the classroom discussion.

4. Include sufficient space for students to make notes on the handout.
5. Photocopy and distribute this handout to students at the beginning of your session.

Give students a few minutes to evaluate and compare the bibliographic information that you excerpted as Sources #1 and #2. To begin class discussion, pose the following questions:

1. Which indexing source is better? What makes it better?”
2. Of the two underlying articles that these two sources refer to, which article do you think is better? Why?
3. How might you use the information from each index source to find additional articles on the topic?
4. A final question to get students thinking about the use of subject headings should not be asked until after the class discusses the fact that both sources refer to the same journal article: “How come Source #1 and Source #2 do not use the same subject headings?”