Suggested Criteria for Titles
Abstracts and Index Terms
in DoD Technical Reports

Alexander G. Hoshovsky
SUGGESTED
CRITERIA FOR TITLES, ABSTRACTS,
AND INDEX TERMS IN DOD TECHNICAL REPORTS

(Based on talk given at the Scientific and Technical Information
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INTRODUCTION

This talk is concerned with the preparation of titles, abstracts and keywords in technical reports of the Department of Defense. The reason for selecting this topic stems from the conviction that the quality of these three aspects of technical reporting are essential to the effective transfer of documented S&T information.

As you will recall, the quality of titles, abstracts, and keywords has been highlighted and brought to the attention of the whole research and engineering community by the so-called Weinberg Report. This President's Science Advisory Committee report stated that the individual scientist and engineer must participate in the information transfer process, and not leave the entire process to the professional documentalist. In particular it urged the authors to:

"a. Title papers in a meaty and informative manner

"b. Index their contributions with keywords taken from standard thesauri

"c. Write informative abstracts." (1)

I am sure you are familiar with the way in which this set of recommendations has been implemented in the Department of Defense, and therefore will skip the chronology of various DoD actions. The tangible product of this implementation is the current DD Form 1473, and the corollary instructions in the Armed Services Procurement Regulations.

But, to tell the authors what must be done and providing them with a form on which to do it is not enough. Authors are not abstracters or indexers. They cannot be expected to know the art of documentation
as well as they know their science. If we expect them to do the work of documentalists, we are obliged to advise them about the criteria and techniques of the documentation profession.

Unfortunately neither the Weinberg Report, nor the Procurement Regulations, nor most of the service regulations and guides offer this kind of advice. Further, many of the organizational editors employed to help the authors with their writing, know little about information retrieval, and therefore don't offer this kind of advice.

What is still worse, as yet there is no universal agreement even among the documentalists on criteria to be applied. Depending on one's orientation there are those who favor brevity and propose telegraphic style even at the expense of clarity. Others take an opposite view. Still others cannot agree on the verb forms, points of view, length or inclusion and exclusion of certain data. These and other subjects have been now studied by an American Standards Association's Working Group on Abstracts for over two years. Hopefully an agreement can be reached soon.

My purpose today is not to establish universal standards. Rather, I want to point out some of the shortcomings found in DoD technical reports and to suggest a few guidelines toward better titles, better abstracts and more useful keywords until the ASA standards become available. I hope some of you may find these guidelines useful.

TITLES

Shortcomings

To acquaint you better with the shortcomings in titles I have here a few horrible examples taken from actual DoD technical reports. The
first one reads "Electrical and Electronic Properties of Materials
Information Retrieval Program." Believe it or not, it has been composed
by information specialists. Contrary to my expectation, it does not
deal with the electrical and electronic properties of materials.
Actually, it is a status report of the Information Center on Electrical
and Electronic Properties of Materials located at the Hughes Aircraft
Company.

The next one seems to be more suitable for a detective story; its
title proclaims in bold capital letters "ELF INVESTIGATIONS." To the
initiated" it means that the document deals with the extremely low
frequencies, but to the computer and, for that matter, to a $3500/year
key punch operator, it means nothing.

Figure 1 shows other examples of "un-information." Very likely
the first award should go to the one titled "Input-Output Experiment."
It deals with an experiment to determine the feasibility of using
auroral phenomena to simulate the ionizing effects produced by high
altitude nuclear detonations; clearly an respect of geophysics and
not of computer technology.

The Problem

The construction of an informative title is not easy. Remember
that here one tries to abstract from a 500-or 5000-word paper the
contents, the significance, and the nature of the work, and express all
this in five or six words. Which of these 500 words to select - this is
the dilemma. It is useless to criticize authors when they come out with
unacceptable titles. The thing to do is to offer them adequate sugges-
tions which will allow them to make a selection of informative terms.
Since titles are for the benefit of the would-be reader, let's consider what might go through the reader's mind when he looks at a title and decides whether or not to order the paper from his library. I suspect that the first question he might ask himself is: "Do I recognize any words here that represent the subjects in which I am interested?" His second might be: "Does the author cover the area with appropriate orientation, i.e., is it viewed from the point of view which I would like to explore?" Finally he might hesitate on the
nature of the writing: "Is it theoretical, practical work of immediate application, original work, review of literature on the subject, a new way of applying old knowledge, etc.?”

When the reader has the document in his hand, or uses such a publication as the Technical Abstract Bulletin of the Defense Documentation Center, an affirmative answer to the first question may lead him to scan the abstract where his second and third question will be answered. But when the source is a document such as the Index of OAR Research Results which lists only titles, or a list of references in another paper, he must either order the document, ask other people if they know about it, or forget the whole sorry mess and go on with his regular work.

Suggested Elements of an Informative Title

If you accept this as a reasonable assumption of the reader's behavior, you might construct for yourself a set of preliminary criteria for an informative title. Accordingly, a good informative title will contain words which give a clue to.

a. The subject of the paper (what area is studied)

b. The purpose of the study (what are we looking for)

c. The nature of the study (report on an experiment, state-of-the-art, critique, etc.)

These words must now be connected into a meaningful phrase. The meaning is achieved by the use of prepositions and conjunctions.(3)

By way of illustration let us take a look at the document mentioned earlier titled "ELF INVESTIGATION." From reading the introduction we find that the author studied the naturally occurring magnetic signals.
in the frequency range of about 10 cycles per second. The same introduction reveals that he studied it in order to determine the global behavior of these signals. Finally, from the text it became apparent that this is the first time that anyone has tried to conduct measurements on such a large scale. Using our set of criteria we could reconstruct the title to read: "World-Wide Magnetic Field Measurements of Extremely Low Frequencies in the Atmosphere."

There are other ways the title could be constructed, using different words and a different way of connecting them into a meaningful phrase. But it requires that the author consider the eventual reader, evaluate the contents of the report, and pay attention to the informational content of single words.

Other Attributes of a "Good" Title

As you know, practically all titles will at some time or other be mechanically processed. The digital computer, designed to reduce the drudgery of repetitive operations, is still rather a simple beast operating on numbers one and zero, and limited to a precise set of logic designed by its programmer. It imposes therefore a set of limitations which must be observed. In case of titles these limitations deal with the length of titles, superscripts and subscripts and use of words of broad and general meaning.

Length. If possible the length of a title should be limited to about 100 characters (including spaces between words). Many of the so-called Keyword in Context Indexes still use a program which allows only 60 characters to be printed; words beyond this limit are omitted (Figure 2).
Those of you who are interested in the technicalities of this limitation should read Luhn's paper on KWIC. 

"Forbidden" Words. The premium placed on space in the computer's memory dictates that words of general significance be avoided. Those who design retrieval systems know that one is seldom interested in such words as "report," "explanation," "uses," "model," "aerospace," as recognition or retrieval clues. Hence an effort is made to place them on the "forbidden" list; the computer automatically excludes them from being used as indexing terms. In an index concerned with information handling, it is entirely possible that a title "Report on Some Most Recent Thoughts Affecting the Exchange of Information in the Field of Technological Innovation" would be automatically excluded.

Symbols. The third limitation is in the use of superscripts and subscripts. This is due to the present limitations in many computer print-outs which will write CO$_2$ as CO2; (CH$_3$)$_3$NH$^+$ as (CH3)$_3$NH PLUS; and log$_2$ $\pi$ as LOG2 PI. Keypunch personnel cannot be expected to translate all of these symbols into equivalent word-descriptors.

The advances in computer technology and information processing techniques will in time solve some of the problems; in the meantime we should be careful to produce titles which can be machined with the existing tools and techniques. This is one way to assure that our writings are brought to the attention of others.

INFORMATIVE ABSTRACTS

The Problem

Abstracts come in two general types: the indicative, which is not much more than a healthy extension of the title, and the informative, which gives the actual substance of the paper. Historically the
informative abstract was developed to act as a substitute for the paper; a natural reaction to the inability of certain groups to keep up with the literature in rapidly expanding fields. The writing of such abstracts became a highly skilled business - not likely to be done well by non-scientists. This led the abstracting services to employ scientists in various disciplines, usually on a nonresident basis. Shortages of scientists willing to do this work further led the journals to require "author abstracts."

Unfortunately many authors simply do not know the difference between an informative and indicative abstract; even fewer of them know the essential elements which should be included in the informative abstract to convey the important contents of the paper. What is still worse, many editors are too preoccupied with commas and margins to give sufficient attention to this part of the report.

The examples of poor abstracts are many and varied. A most recent example worth exhibiting is one prepared by the people who should know better. It can be seen in all its glory in Figure 3. Of course, this is an extreme case. Most abstracts are at least intended to convey some information about the document.

THE CRITERIA FOR AN INFORMATIVE ABSTRACT

The Contents

If the abstract is to give faithful representation of the paper, it ought to tell us:

Why the work? (the purpose)
How accomplished? (the method)
What facts? (the results)
What meaning? (the conclusion)
**DOCUMENT CONTROL DATA - R&D**

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**10. AVAILABILITY/LIMITATION NOTICES**

Distribution of this Document is Unlimited

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<td>AFSC</td>
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**13. ABSTRACT**

Contains various papers read and working group reports developed at the AF STINFO Conference.
Note I have not mentioned the "What." This should be evident from the title which accompanies the abstract; in fact the title is normally considered as part of the abstracting entry. The "What" will also become evident from the words in the abstract. The purpose, method, results and conclusion are then the essential elements of the abstract.

The Abstract in Figure 4 meets these criteria.

![Figure 4]

We conducted experiments to determine the electron interaction in decaying afterglow plasmas at temperatures as low as 5K. Such low energies are present when the parent gas is immersed in a bath of liquid helium of 4.2K. Our method included electronic microwave diagnostic techniques coupled with radiometric procedures. Experiments were performed for neutral densities in the range 2.3 x 10^17 to 1.2 x 10^18 atoms/cc. Concurrently, we inferred electron temperatures from microwave noise radiation from the afterglow plasma.

An "effective" collision cross section computed on the basis of binary collision theory is 1.9 x 10^{-15} cm^2 at the low end of the above density range. This value is 3.5 times larger than the cross section at 300K.

The electron temperature relaxation during plasma decay is some two orders of magnitude longer than that expected if the dominant mechanism were elastic collisions with neutral gas atoms.

Electron heating through superelastic collisions with a helium singlet metastable atom appears to be the cause of long relaxation times. A cross section of 6 x 10^{-2} cm^2 at 4.2K is deduced for the collisional de-excitation of these metastable atoms by atoms in the ground state.

Interpretation of afterglow quenching experiments indicates that electron recombination loss in low temperature helium plasmas may be controlled by the rate of production of helium molecular ions.

Of course not all the abstracts can be broken down this way, or in this order. The order may differ because it may be easier for the author to start with the conclusion and end with the method. The paper may not have a conclusion because it represents only a compilation of data. The method may not be appropriate because the paper is only a review of work done by others. These variations must be accepted.

Nevertheless the attempt to consider these elements should result in
better and more informative abstracts. As a minimum it will get you to think about the informational content and, where necessary, it will lead you to substitute other important aspects such as scope of the investigation, validity of the experiment and similar attributes of the work. It may also lead you to reconsider the contents of your paper. You may even rewrite it.

**Phrases and Symbols.** The second element concerns the use of words, phrases and symbols to reflect the informational content. As you know the brevity of the abstract is its essential characteristic. So is the clarity, if the abstract is to convey meaningful information. These two are often mutually at odds; striking a satisfactory balance is an art which must be acquired by practice. One way to assure clarity is to question every technical word. Here the use of the dictionary will help, not as an authority to determine the meaning of the word used in your specialty, but to find out if the word's everyday meaning may mislead the reader. (5)

**Length.** On the side of brevity the abstract is best when it is limited to 200-250 words. This can be done in most cases by avoiding idle words, which do not add to the informational content. Figure 5 shows how an author-prepared abstract was reduced by simply crossing out the words and phrases without noticeably reducing the informational content of the abstract. Figure 6 shows what can be done with a simple reorganization of the text. Figure 7 shows an abstract rewritten to conform with our formal criteria for an informative abstract.
ABSTRACT

Twenty-three simultaneous measurements of the horizontal magnetic field in 5-15 cps range were made near Kingston, R.I., and Brandenburg, Germany. The assumption was that if the wave forms recorded at both locations came from the same source they would appear within one tenth second on both records.

The results show ten out of twenty-three recordings to contain wave forms which begin within 0.1 second of each other at both stations. Statistical analysis of each 3-minute record indicates that the number of simultaneous received signals is too large to be purely accidental coincidence.

The simultaneous occurrence of extremely low frequency wave trains at these locations shows significant correlation with the index of integrated Lyman-alpha flare energy from the visible disk of the sun.

As a minimum it will be best to consider these points, and not necessary substitute other important aspects such as scope of the investigation, validity of the experiment and the like.

Figure 5

Figure 6

Figure 7
INDEXING THE PAPER

The Problem

The shortage of indexers is forcing still another task on the authors. Here the author is asked to indicate by a set of single words or short phrases the clues by means of which one may search for a document in a collection of many papers on varied topics. This is an area of heated controversy among the documentalists and retrieval specialists. It is not my purpose to join this controversy. Rather, I would like to point out that the Engineers' Joint Council requires author indexes for papers published in their journals, and recently the Department of Defense made this requirement a companion to the author-produced abstracts. Here is what the Department has to say about indexing terms:

"KEYWORDS: Keywords are technically meaningful terms or short phrases that characterize a report and may be used as index entries for cataloging the report. Keywords must be selected so that no security classification is required. Identifiers, such as equipment model designation, trade names, military project code name, geographic location, may be used as keywords but will be followed by an indication of the technical context."

Selection Criteria

If author indexes are to be more than a random collection of general terms (of little value in a retrieval system) then a
generalized set of criteria, like those for titles and abstracts, is necessary.

Accordingly, I would like to suggest the following set of "rules."

1. Use terms which have a precise meaning. Either a manual or machine system can easily translate the specifics to the general. The reverse is not possible.

2. If possible, also use the terms listed in the DDC Thesaurus of Descriptors. This is the vocabulary of DDC; this is the primary place where your index terms will be used. If you use a new term (as yet not in current use) explain its meaning.

3. Plan to use at least one term for each of the following aspects of the research (or study):
   a. Specific materials/data/theories/theses studied
   b. Specific properties determined experimentally (or theoretically)
   c. Specific methods or processes investigated
   d. Equipment used
   e. Specific applications for materials/methods/processes/equipment, wherever they show promise beyond the particular experiment

4. Also add the generic expression to the specific terms, i.e., "supersonic aircraft" as well as "B-70."

These are a few simple guides. They will not make authors to be expert indexers; nor is this their purpose. But they will make the supplied index terms mean more.

LINKS, ROLES AND WEIGHTS

Now a word about the links, roles and weights. Although they are optional parts of the DoD instruction, they deserve our consideration.
Why Links, Roles and Weights?

Briefly, these three concepts were developed to cope with the problems of false retrieval. The false retrieval occurs when the index terms used as clues to retrieval of documents recover the documents which are not relevant to the problem of the user. This, in the language of information specialists, is known as "false drops" or simple "noise."

The noise occurs because the index terms have been removed from the context. Standing alone they do not show how they were used in the text. You don't know their relationship to other index terms which describe the document. You have no idea whether the index term represents a serious and detailed treatment, or whether it was used only in passing in connection with some other subject.

Consider the following index terms which could be assigned to my lecture:

- Writing
- Abstracting
- Meaning
- Technical Reports

If you were a semanticist, concerned with "meaning of words" and asked the retrieval system to get you documents which deal with "meaning," you would recover my paper. For you, my paper would be simply a "false drop." Or if you wanted a paper on the outlines for writing technical reports and asked for "writing" and "technical reports" the recovery of my paper would similarly be discouraging.

The Basic Concepts

Briefly, links are symbolic representations attached to the index terms to show that certain words appear together in a sentence or
paragraph; i.e., they are somehow linked with each other. Thus the 1964 OAR Annual Report could have the following terms: research, budget, professional personnel, scientists, rockets, nuclear physics, etc. The document (let's number it 1000) would be indexed:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Code</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research</td>
<td>1000A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budget</td>
<td>1000A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional personnel</td>
<td>1000B</td>
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<tr>
<td>Scientists</td>
<td>1000B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rockets</td>
<td>1000C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuclear physics</td>
<td>1000D</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The letter "A" would show that budget and research are connected in the document. Similarly, the letter "B" would link the terms "professional personnel" and "scientists." You would also know that nuclear physics is not linked with the budget.

Roles are the symbols which act as a sort of grammar - they show the function of the word in a document. It may be that the word represents "something which is acted upon" or "an agent which acts upon something." For example, a paper which deals with the "effects of cosmic particles on the titanium skin of a spacecraft" would have:

<table>
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<th>Term</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cosmic particles</td>
<td>200A2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Titanium</td>
<td>200B1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spacecraft</td>
<td>200A1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skin</td>
<td>200B1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The numeral "1" after the letter "A" signifies the object which is acted upon and the numeral "2" signifies the agent which acts. These are preassigned meanings as determined by the operators of the retrieval system. "Weights" would tell you the emphasis given to the word in the text.

In the same example you might indicate:

- Cosmic particles 2000A-2-2
- Titanium 2000B-1-1
- Spacecraft 2000A-1-3
- Skin 2000-B-1-3

In a system where 1 means "extensive treatment," 2 means "slight treatment," and 3 "mentioned in passing" the term "Titanium" would be the most important subject in the report.

The Difficulties

From the above explanation you might conclude that links, roles and weights are simple concepts, which should not present any serious problem in their application. The real retrieval systems, however, are complex. They have many thousands of documents; even more index terms. They deal with more than one topic, from many points of view. This is where the simple concept of links, roles, and weights runs into difficulties.

Time will not permit me to deal adequately with these difficulties, and I must refer you to the literature on this subject (References 6, 7, 8 and 9). Briefly these general observations are applicable to links and roles.

a. The use of links and roles breaks down unless there is high consistency in their assignment. Usually, only the trained indexers are capable of such consistency.
b. The roles used in engineering sciences may be totally inadequate in psychological or mathematical sciences. Separate coding systems are often required for various disciplines, and for different collections of documents.

c. The links can do a decent job to show how certain words are separated in a document which deals with several subjects (such as annual or quarterly report). They are inadequate for showing relationships.*

**SUMMARY**

I will now summarize what we have been talking about. I will do this in the form of an "Author's Check List" which follows (Figure 8). It should constitute a quick reference to what we have been talking about. It can also be used as a check list for writing or reviewing technical reports.

Titles, abstracts and index terms are our present "handles" of recognition and retrieval. The more frequent use of machine produced indexes, the demand for better information services, the increasing cost of processing large volumes of documents and a greater reliance of users on "capsulated information," demand that we increasingly concentrate on these handles and try to make them more useful. In this way, I believe, we will be getting at the root of many problems which plague both the users and the operators of document retrieval systems.

*A paper by Taube explains the inherent theoretical inadequacy of links as a method of showing the relationship between words. (6)
<table>
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<th>Title</th>
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<tr>
<td>☐ The purpose of the work is clearly stated</td>
<td>☐ Definitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☐ The method of investigation is explained or referenced</td>
<td>☐ Subject encompassing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☐ New findings are easily found in the text</td>
<td>☐ Superfluous phrases eliminated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☐ Conclusion evident or substantiated</td>
<td>☐ Specific terms used</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>☐ Superscripts and subscripts avoided</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>☐ Acts as a substitute for the full paper</td>
<td>☐ Words of special significance from the title or abstract</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☐ Gives significant results (including most important numerical values)</td>
<td>☐ New words from the text for:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☐ States purpose of work</td>
<td>☐ Material/equipment/system</td>
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<tr>
<td>☐ Explains method used</td>
<td>☐ Processes/techniques/operations</td>
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<tr>
<td>☐ Interprets the meaning of findings (conclusion)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>☐ Words which show relationship of this work to other disciplines or applications</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Figure 8
REFERENCES


Suggested Criteria for Titles, Abstracts, and Index-Terms in DOD Technical Reports

The DOD requires that its authors complete DD Form 1473 (a bibliographic control form) on all DOD technical reports. This requirement should be, but is not now, accompanied by a set of criteria for the preparation of titles, abstracts and keywords.

The titles should be definitive, subject encompassing, and composed from specific terms. Superfluous phrases, superscripts and subscripts should be avoided. The abstracts should contain statements of purpose of the study, methodology used, give significant results, and interpret the meaning of the study; they should act as a substitute for the whole report. Index-terms should be those which describe the materials, equipment or systems used in the study; processes, techniques, or operations inherent in the study. They should contain both generic and specific expressions, as well as words which show relationship of the reported work to other disciplines.

The use of links and roles (an optional DOD indexing requirement) is questioned because it requires a consistency in indexing, as well as different role definitions in different document collection.

The adoption of the proposed criteria should lead to a more meaningful author participation in the DOD documentation process.
### KEY WORDS

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**1. ORIGINATING ACTIVITY:** Enter the name and address of the contractor, subcontractor, grantee, or other organization (corporate author) issuing the report.

**2a. REPORT SECURITY CLASSIFICATION:** Enter the overall security classification of the report. Indicate whether "Restricted Data" is included. Marking is to be in accordance with appropriate security regulations.

**2b. GROUP:** Automatic downgrading is specified in DoD Directive 5200.10 and Armed Forces Industrial Manual. Enter the group number. Also, when applicable, show that optional markings have been used for Group 3 and Group 4 as authorized.

**3. REPORT TITLE:** Enter the complete report title in all capital letters. Titles in all cases should be unclassified. If a meaningful title cannot be selected without classification, show title classification in all capitals in parenthesis immediately following the title.

**4. DESCRIPTIVE NOTES:** If appropriate, enter the type of report, e.g., interim, progress, summary, annual, or final. Give the inclusive dates when a specific reporting period is covered.

**5. AUTHOR(S):** Enter the name(s) of author(s) as shown on or in the report. Enter: last name, first name, middle initial. If military, show rank and branch of service. The name of the principal author is an absolute minimum requirement.

**6. REPORT DATE:** Enter the date of the report as day, month, year, or month, year. If more than one date appears on the report, use date of publication.

**7a. TOTAL NUMBER OF PAGES:** The total page count should follow normal pagination procedures, i.e., enter the number of pages containing information.

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