

Read it and weep: How one library began to improve its database descriptions

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Background

- TU's library website lists [375+ databases](#)
- Wide-ranging & costly (more than \$1M/year) resources
- Many database descriptions are publisher-supplied: can be lengthy; may contain jargon, "sales" language, extraneous detail
- Typical e-Resources workflows make this a common issue for many libraries
- Descriptions are used to build [research guides](#) (LibGuides) from which students need to choose among recommended resources
- Pandemic highlighted need to lower barriers & improve online user experience (UX), including website readability
- The Cook Library UX Committee subgroup asked: **Could our database descriptions be improved for a better UX?**
- Methods: UX testing; a review of the literature including principles for writing for the web; readability metrics & tools
- With our findings, we've started a conversation at our library

UX Study for Readability

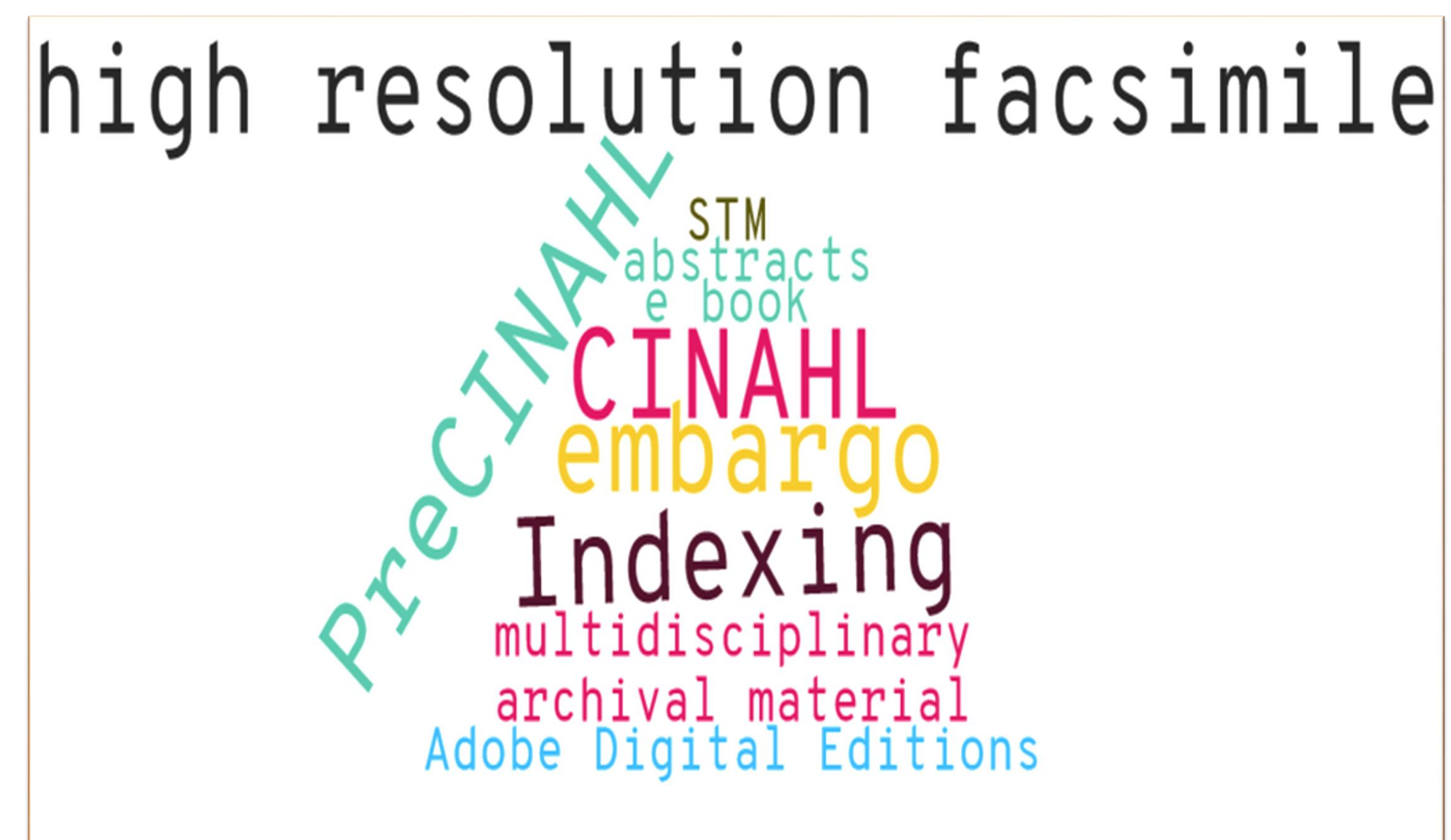
- To reach undergrads after we went online, we publicized the study through social media and created a [Google Doc survey](#) with 5 sample database descriptions
- Participants were asked to highlight words/phrases that were unclear or difficult to understand

SAMPLE RESPONSE:

Database A:

Indexing and **abstracts** for over 7,000 journals. Full text of articles for over 4,000 scholarly publications, including more than 3,100 peer-reviewed publications. **Multidisciplinary** subject coverage, including social sciences, humanities, education, computer sciences, engineering, physics, chemistry, language & linguistics, arts & literature, medicine, and ethnic studies.

WORDCLOUD OF TERMS HIGHLIGHTED BY UNDERGRAD STUDY PARTICIPANTS (n=3) AS BEING UNCLEAR OR DIFFICULT TO UNDERSTAND:



Readability Metrics

- Readability metrics consider word & sentence length/complexity
- Created txt file of our 375 descriptions
- Uploaded to [Datayze Readability Analyzer](#)
- Results: **grade 14.66** on Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level; 24.19 on Flesch Reading Ease (**graduate level**); 18.7 on Gunning Fog Index (**between difficult & very difficult**)
- Learn more about readability metrics/tools: <https://tinyurl.com/readtools72021>

Literature Review

Facing challenges with attracting study participants, we supplemented our findings with a lit review:

- In 20 UX tests at 14 libraries only 52% of users able to find articles/databases (Kupersmith, 2012); terminology were a key obstacle
- Brief, focused descriptions with terms undergrads understood helped (Archambault et al., 2019)
- Students read at lower level in subject areas new to them (Klare in Gray, 2012)
- Simplify to support scanning rather than close reading on web; use task-oriented language; consider audience including those with least amount of comfort/experience (Albert S. Cook Library, Towson University, Writing Guide, 2021)

Towards More Readable Descriptions

- We concluded: **YES, our database descriptions could be improved for a better UX**
- Shared findings with library staff
- Discussed ways to streamline revision submission with e-Resources staff
- Co-led workshop with LibGuides support team for liaison librarians:
 - Shared findings, best practices, & sample revisions
 - Conducted revision exercise & discussion
- Colleagues recognized importance of revising descriptions
- Next step: Seek feedback on logistics, goals, volunteers for multidisciplinary databases, subject area needs

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