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Claim to Fame

So far as we know, no team of linguists and sociologists has as yet made a joint attack on the problems posed by the evolution and distribution of the alphabetical abbreviations for institutional names. Unquestionably the condensation of titles saves effort in speaking and cost in printing, but other factors doubtless serve to increase the currency of the short forms. An element of gamesmanship surely plays some part. No one is going to refer to the Atomic Energy Commission by its full title among his scientific peers for fear they might think him unfamiliar with "AEC." But no simple rule prevails for the formation of such abbreviations. The National Bureau of Standards is invariably referred to in conversation as "the NBS," but the National Gallery of Art is never called "the NGA."

Perhaps a little classification of abbreviations will be useful. The classic type is formed from the initial letters of all or almost all of the words that make up the institutional title, but the abbreviation so formed does not form a word. The letters are pronounced one by one. Familiar examples are FBI, CIA, and NAS-NRC.

The other common, though more recent, type of abbreviation is, like the classic type, formed from the initial letters of some or all of the words in the title, but the title has been so arranged that these initial letters can be pronounced in syllables, as words. To one not familiar with them, these words give a strange, even a barbaric, flavor to the language. Among them are UNESCO, NATO, ICSU (pronounced "ik-sue" and translated as the International Council of Scientific Unions), and ARPA-IDA (pronounced as spelled and translated as Advanced Research Projects Agency-Institute for Defense Analysis).

Some others fail to fit into either pattern. Thus, MIT (for Massachusetts Institute of Technology), DOD (for Department of Defense), and FID (for Fédération Internationale de Documentation) could be, but happily never are, treated as words. Another type of shortened title is made up of some of the initial letters combined with an abbreviation of a word. Among these hybrid types are *Aslib* (pronounced "ah-slib" and standing for the Association of Scientific Libraries) and AMSOC, for the American Miscellaneous Society.

The American Association for the Advancement of Science is abbreviated as the AAAS. To pronounce this form letter by letter would be tedious and would convey an impression of indecision: "eh, eh, eh, ess." This is avoided in two ways: physicists and mathematicians call it "the ā-cube-ess" (A³S); all others run it smoothly off their tongues as "the triple-ā-ess."

To look at it from another angle, widespread recognition of an abbreviated title is an indication of fame and status. Recently, a young institution has moved into the elite group of organizations whose shortened titles have national currency. We congratulate the NSF, the National Science Foundation, on the occasion of its tenth birthday, 10 May 1960, for achieving such fame at so tender an age and, what is more important, for having developed in such a way that it has earned the respect of the nation's scientists. May the NSF continue its good work in support of research, education, and communication in the sciences for ten to the *n*th (10ⁿ) years.—G.DuS.