

Tips for Writing Successful Conference Proposals

Veteran conference presenters offer the following tips for writing successful proposals:

- Focus, focus, focus
 - “You don't need to tell us everything. Remember, this is a rhetorical situation, with a limited word count. Think about what people might need to know.”
- Situate the proposal within an ongoing conversation
 - “It's important to cite, to indicate you are familiar with work that's been done. But citing “randomly” can actually hurt—so make sure you're citing with a purpose.”
 - “Get to the point early, but make sure you've situated a problem.”
 - “Locate your talk in relation to a key article or book or two. Don't write an annotated bib or get lost in trying to summarize a dozen scholars, but, again, give the readers confidence that your talk will address knowledgeable readers--namely them!--and not waste their time plowing old ground.”
 - “Feel free to pose questions, but only if they directly follow the situation/contextualization.”
- Offer conclusions rather than topics
 - “The whole proposal should be defending a specific thesis, not announcing a topical area and speculating that 10 months from now you'll have something to say about it. Do enough work that you can state a claim now.”
 - Bad: “I explore the shifting landscape of writing center work.”
 - Better: “I argue that tutoring is no longer the *sin qua non* of writing center work.”
 - “Promise something worth delivering--not so much that you can't deliver it, but enough that a reader is confident that you'll have goods to deliver.”
 - “Do not talk about future activities; stay away from “I will conduct a study” or “I plan to do X” constructions.”
 - “The whole proposal should be defending a specific thesis, not announcing a topical area and speculating that 10 months from now you'll have something to say about it.”
 - “A proposal along the lines of ‘Here's how we do things at my school’ goes to the bottom of the pile unless it's clearly just a brief preamble to the vital, ‘which I offer to illustrate the broader theory of/practice of/rationale for X, which is of true importance to the profession in several ways.’”
- Consider indicating what the audience will “get” from the presentation, how the audience will benefit from it, and/or what *particular* audiences might find the proposal valuable and interesting.

- Develop an interesting title
 - “As much time as you spend burnishing your first sentence or two, spend at least that much on the title. Titles that don't have colons actually stand out. They show reviewers that someone has actually polished their idea enough to state it in one clause or phrase. You might imagine that you are the only clever person to have thought about this particular play on words in relation to the conference theme. You aren't. Which is not to say that you shouldn't try to address the theme if your topic suits. Just don't gymnastically knot yourself.”
- Avoid announcing your graduate student status unless the point of your proposal concerns the subject position of being a graduate student. That just gives people reason to bump you in favor of that assistant professor who needs tenure or the wise sounding proposal that sounds like the “voice of experience and authority.”
- Provide an advance organizer (an outline of the talk)
 - Example: "The presentation will spend 5 minutes talking about the methods of my study, 5 minutes explaining results, and 10 minutes discussing implications and applications. I will provide a detailed two-page handout of findings, both to clarify things for the audience and to inform questions and comments during the discussion." Or, "I will make four points: A, B, C, and D."
- Stay within the word length confines.
- Avoid referring to the session or presentation as a "paper.”
- Visit <http://www.ncte.org/cccc/committees/newcomers/suggestions> for more information about writing effective 4Cs conference proposals

Information about 4Cs Proposal Selection

Proposals are blindly reviewed and proportionately selected. Take the "what category to submit in," for example. Chairs select the number for each category in proportion to the number of proposals. So, if there are 5 proposals in category A and 10 proposals in category B, then category B will have twice as many acceptances. Your percentages are the same in each case; 1 out of A and 2 out of B is 20% in each case. Now, in a category with very few submissions, particularly strong ones will stand out more, but I have some faith that that will be true of strong submissions regardless of numbers. Having said that, reviewers miss things. Each year some very fine people (even very famous) don't make it through the review system; occasionally they deserve it, occasionally not.

Likewise, most chairs assign a certain percentage of slots to "full panel" proposals and a certain percentage to "individual" proposals, though this is less prescribed. It's certainly true that full panels are "easier" to deal with. They come prefabbed and are either accepted or rejected--in toto, regardless of the brilliance of Speaker 2. Individual proposals are first judged and selected, then assembled into panels by eight or so "stage 2 readers" who meet in the summer at NCTE headquarters for this purpose

and to choose the workshops. Still, every program chair saves a good percentage of the slots for individual proposals, and every chair makes an accepted proposal fit on some panel, no matter how creative they have to be in devising an umbrella to cover all the talks. If you are proposing an entire panel, make sure you have a panel's worth of ideas. Bad: "This panel will talk about the comma. Speaker 1 will describe the comma. Speaker 2 will describe what is not a comma. Speaker 3 will reflect on the comma." This seems like padding.