

Graduate Student Professionalization Workshop on Conference Proposal Writing

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Strategies for Writing Conference Abstracts and Presentations

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Abstracts and Proposals:

- If the conference has a special theme or key questions on the CFP, use them in the proposal. You don't have to use every single word or make it completely obvious, but allude or echo or otherwise *suggest* a connection to the theme in the title or the abstract, or both. This is especially important for CCCCs proposals.
- It is usually better if you have already written the paper or done the research to some extent when you write the proposal—but not required. Many professionals propose research in order to get started on a project, or test out research questions that may wish to develop into longer publications. If you haven't done the research yet, be careful about naming particular scholars and theories in the title. You might need to change some direction or scope as you get deeper into the research and don't want to be limited by a title you chose months earlier.
- It is acceptable to use the same *research* for more than one conference presentation, but not an identical *paper*. Always change the titles. Always consider how to adapt for a different audience, theme, or format (e.g., turning research from a previous conference paper for a panel into a workshop; taking research from an SWCA presentation and recasting it for an IWCA audience, which may include some attendees from SWCA; taking research that was empirical and presenting it as narrative, etc.). This may also mean going from a broad treatment to a more up-close and in-depth treatment of a single aspect, or going from setting up an exigence to suggesting how to address it, or going from a theoretical to an applied approach.
- It is acceptable to use research from your MA thesis or a doctoral dissertation, but: do not use the same title as the thesis or dissertation, think carefully about how much detail to keep or what details need to be added so audience can follow you, be very conscious of how the conference audience has different needs from a thesis or diss reader, and be sure it's connected to the theme or topic of the conference.
- It is *not* acceptable to publish research, and then read the published article as a conference presentation. However, it is fine to expand and change a published text with new research, and recast it as a conference presentation.
- Always make sure your idea is new to the field—not just to you. Before you write the abstract, do a lit review to figure out where the conversation about this topic has been and who has been involved in it, and how you are adapting, responding to, and/or expanding and taking further what has been done already. Make sure you talk about your ideas and share a draft with peers or faculty to ensure you are proposing something original.
- Your title will go on your CV, so think about how professional it will look and sound, and how collectively your titles create a portrait of you as researcher and scholar. Try not to have

titles that are too long or complicated. If it extends beyond three lines of type, rethink it. Also don't overdo the punctuation—a title with a colon, semicolon, dash and parentheses may be overkill. Likewise with a title that doubles itself (though these tend to be fairly common at 4Cs; for example, from 2012: "I AM SPAM: or, Writer's Block in a Posthuman Era"). Also avoid being *too* clever or using insider jokes; it's fine to be playful but you don't want to trivialize your topic and research or make it unintentionally humorous (or worse, silly) to others.

- Before you write the abstract, ask yourself: "How does this presentation fit into my research agenda? How does it show my growth as a researcher and scholar?" It is often preferred by job search committees, that you have a delineation of a topic or area—a series of papers in the same research area or papers related to each other but showing depth—rather than, say a dozen presentations on entirely different topics unrelated to your major research area or to each other. Also think about how your presentations may reflect a primary and a secondary research area, or your field and your focus. In other words, it's natural to do research in different areas or with different subjects, but cluster 2 or 3. It can be considered less professional to have a string of disconnected presentations.

Attending and Participating in Conferences:

- Most conferences offer both discounted registration for graduate students and early registration discounts: take advantage of both
- Many conferences require that you be a member of the sponsoring organization before you submit a proposal, or in order to register for the conference. Check the membership fees in advance to see if it will be worthwhile; on the plus side, most memberships include other benefits, like cheaper registration rate, publications, web resources and more.
- Many conferences and professional organizations offer travel grants and scholarships for graduate students. These are competitive, and have the prestige of awards, so be sure to apply! Also, check deadlines for submitting applications and ask for letters of recommendation as soon as you can to give faculty members time to support your application. Grant and scholarship winners are listed in the conference program and often recognized at Awards lunches, dinners or another conference event.
- If you know that you want to work in a particular state or region (outside of the one you are in) you might consider joining the professional organizations in that region/state and attending conferences. Both will help you network and form contacts and colleagues before you go on the job market.
- If you are putting whole panels together, it is often attractive to reviewers if the presenters come from different institutions. Consider collaborating with contacts you have from your other degree programs or colleagues you have met at other conferences—these can also lead to great connections for the job market.
- Handouts: consider creating a handout to distribute at your presentation. Always include: your name, your email, your institution, the session number, date, name of conference, title of paper. Other things to include: Bibliography, selected key quotations, discussion questions, material that didn't fit in paper but is relevant to your research and topic

- Bring business cards to exchange; collect business cards from colleagues interested in your research and your research areas; email them and stay in touch following the conference; you may also email people asking for a copy of their presentation
- Technology and Presenting: very rarely do presentations use PowerPoint. Some use video clips, audio clips, or a multimedia text that accompanies or substitutes for a portion of the talk; check with people who have presented at that conference before for advice about whether or not to include multimedia, or to just read
- When you attend the conference, be sure to go to panels with speakers doing research either similar to yours or in an area you want to do research. Introduce yourself to the speaker(s) and suggest getting in touch to share work, collaborate on a project, or just have conversations with someone both familiar and interested in your specialization interests. This can lead to future conference panels, publishing opportunities, and connections for jobs.
- After the conference, consider expanding the conference paper into a journal article that you can then submit for publication. Some conferences have proceedings or publish selected papers as book chapters in anthologies. These are good ways to get your publishing off the ground. Also, sometimes a conference paper can become the basis for a chapter in a masters' thesis or dissertation.