Writing Conference Proposals

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Overview

• Discuss role of academic conferences

• Explain the importance of themes within conference proposals

• Review structure and strategies for writing proposals
• Conferences are important outlets for discussing early research
Academic Conferences

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• Many publications begin as conference presentations
• Discussing early research can help you get feedback
Academic Conferences

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• Hearing early research can highlight new trends
Academic Conferences

- Discussing early research can help you get feedback
- Hearing early research can highlight new trends
- Also provide networking opportunities
• Most conferences revolve around a theme
Conference Themes

- Most conferences revolve around a theme
- Theme = a foundational premise that will tie together all presentations or sessions
- Themes can be specific ideas, keystone authors in a fields, or current circumstances
Conference Themes

• A theme is often discussed in the initial CFP and/or chair’s address
Conference Themes

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Conference Themes

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• Sometimes the theme is discussed directly

• Other times the theme is implied in how the chair contextualizes the conference
Conference Themes

• Here are two important lessons about conference themes
Conference Themes

• First: conference organizers really like their themes
Conference Themes

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• Second: many times, reviewers don’t really know what their theme means
Conference Themes

• A proposal must not only explain your presentation, it must explain how you are defining or applying a given theme

• Show how your research can help expand a conference theme (not just repeat a theme)
Conference Themes

• Simply having a good presentation idea is not enough

• Organizers can sense “copy-and-paste” proposals that don’t engage with a theme
Writing Proposals

• Let’s review some strategies for writing proposals
Writing Proposals

• Let’s review some strategies for writing proposals

• Identify specific moves to make and questions to ask keep in mind
A successful proposal will do the following:
Writing Proposals

- Identify the context of your research
- Define key terms that are central to your research
- Describe the structure of your presentation
- Explain goals or outcomes of your presentation
These steps are usually accomplished in the order I just listed

Walk through each step and identify some useful writing strategies
Writing Proposals

• Identify the context of your research
Writing Proposals

• There are two general writing strategies that can be used to contextualize your research
Writing Proposals

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• First: frame your research as attempting to solve a problem
Writing Proposals

- There are two general writing strategies that can be used to contextualize your research

  - First: frame your research as attempting to solve a problem
  - Second: frame your research as building upon an opportunity
• If you take the “problem” approach, you need to identify the specific problem and explain the risks associated with this problem

• Here are some questions to consider
Writing Proposals

• Is this problem discipline-specific or broader?

• What are the causes and consequences of this problem?

• Have researchers tried to address this problem? If so, why have previous solutions fallen short?
• If you take the “opportunity” approach, you need to summarize an emerging trend and explain how this trend brings up new possibilities
Writing Proposals

- What specific trend are you capitalizing upon? What is novel about this trend?

- What type of untapped possibilities are presented by this trend?

- Have scholars discussed these untapped possibilities? If so, how are you building upon this research? If not, why is your approach new?
Writing Proposals

• Don’t try to apply the “problem” and “opportunity” strategies at the same time
Writing Proposals

• Don’t try to apply the “problem” and “opportunity” strategies at the same time

• In many cases, your research will attempt to solve problems and build upon opportunities

• However, starting with a single focus will streamline your ideas
Contextualizing your research is one opportunity to reinforce the theme of the conference.
Writing Proposals

• Contextualizing your research is one opportunity to reinforce the theme of the conference

• A theme might revolve around a current problem or an opportunity created by emerging developments
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• A theme might revolve around a current problem or an opportunity created by emerging developments

• In these cases, you can respond to a conference theme based on your framing mechanism
Writing Proposals

• After offering context, you need to define your key terms

• Key terms can be a method used to gather data and analyze data, a variable that will be examined throughout an experiment, or criteria that will measure the success of a initiative
If you take the “problem” approach: how can your key terms help address this problem?
Writing Proposals

- If you take the “problem” approach: how can your key terms help address this problem?

- Can your key terms address a variable that has been overlooked?

- Do your key terms resonate with the causes or potential risks of this problem?
If you take the “opportunity” approach: how can your key terms capitalize upon a new trend?
Writing Proposals

• If you take the “opportunity” approach: how can your key terms capitalize upon a new trend?

• Do your key terms highlight new possibilities afforded by the trend you identified earlier?

• How can your key terms offer avenue for further inquiry or application?
If you haven’t already responded to a theme when offering context, defining your key terms can be another opportunity for discussing a theme.
Writing Proposals

• If you haven’t already responded to a theme when offering context, defining your key terms can be another opportunity for discussing a theme.

• In short, you can define and characterize your key terms in through a conference theme.
Writing Proposals

• Example: recent conference revolved around the theme of “common places”
Writing Proposals

- Example: recent conference revolved around the theme of “common places”

- I discussed how we teach canonical texts and what voices/perspectives might get overlooked (identified a problem)

- Redefined the “canon” as a “common place” because scholars share a working knowledge of canonical texts
Writing Proposals

- In this case, I reframed and redefined my key term through the theme of the conference (as opposed to using the conference theme to contextualize my presentation)

- Other situations might be more straightforward but be aware of moments where some interpretation might be warranted
Writing Proposals

• After establishing context and key terms, you should provide an overview of your presentation
Writing Proposals

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• Overview is descriptive and structural

• You can literally say “This presentation will first do X, then Y, then Z…”
Writing Proposals

- Keep brevity in mind
Writing Proposals

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• Focus on the most important feature of your evidence and findings

• If there were difficulties or obstacles you needed to negotiate, acknowledge the most important issue
Writing Proposals

• Lastly, identify the main goals or outcomes of this presentation

• Who can benefit most from your findings?

• What specific contributions can your research make to on-going conversations?
Writing Proposals

• Last step is tricky because it deals with "audience"
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• The audience of your proposal are conference organizers
Writing Proposals

• Last step is tricky because it deals with “audience”

• The audience of your proposal are conference organizers

• However, organizers are thinking of their audience (conference participants) when reviewing proposals
Writing Proposals

• Yes, you are trying to persuade organizers to accept your proposal
Writing Proposals

- Yes, you are trying to persuade organizers to accept your proposal

- Most effective mode of persuasion: show how your presentation can reinforce the impact of the conference

- Show how your presentation can benefit attendees and, by extension, support the conference
Writing Proposals

• Let’s recap
Writing Proposals

• Identify the context of your research

• Define key terms that are central to your research

• Describe the structure of your presentation

• Explain goals or outcomes of your presentation
• Quickly review some writing strategies to avoid
Writing Proposals

- Avoid confrontational language when offering context
Writing Proposals

- Avoid confrontational language when offering context
- Don’t use words such as “right” versus “wrong” when identifying a problem
- Oppositional language is bound to offend the conference reviewers or attendees
Writing Proposals

• Avoid simply repeating the theme of the conference
Writing Proposals

- Avoid simply repeating the theme of the conference
- Saying the same abstract word in every sentence does not clarify the nature of your research
- Remember, it is your goal to teach reviewers how you are interpreting a given theme
Writing Proposals

• Avoid generalizations when discussing concurrent research
Writing Proposals

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• Unlike abstracts, proposals can include references to outside research

• Citations or references can reinforce the relevance of your work or clarify your key terms
Lastly, be selective. It is fine if you need to pass on applying to a conference.
Writing Proposals

• Lastly, be selective. It is fine if you need to pass on applying to a conference

• Sometimes a theme is too different from your research

• Avoid spending time writing a presentation that won’t advance your research or teaching
Writing Proposals

- Time, energy, and money are all limited resources
Writing Proposals

• Time, energy, and money are all limited resources

• Attending a conference requires a lot of planning and logistics (setting aside time to write, moving around teaching schedule, etc.)

• Going to many different conferences a year may not be the most effective use of your energy
• Questions?