

## Writing a successful conference paper proposal

*Explain why your paper is an important scholarly contribution.*

The point of conference papers – indeed the point of scholarship – is to move the discussion forward. You must explain why your proposed paper has broad significance to larger debates in your field but be sure to spend *at least* one substantial paragraph outlining your original contribution. Which thinkers? Which texts? Which countries, which years, which cities, which methods, which questions? You get the idea. Any proposal is only as good as the paper it's based on. Think twice. Is this paper really a contribution or are you just eager to present something? If it's the latter, please reconsider.

*Have a point and articulate it clearly.*

Your goal is to be understood by your colleagues. Tell them exactly what you plan to argue in one thesis sentence. (If you cannot sum up the point of your proposed paper in one sentence that is an indication that you need to scale back your project to fit the limitations of a conference presentation). Then tell them exactly how you plan to support that point.

*Know the literature*

As you outline your argument, you should refer to the existing literature or demonstrate that you are familiar with it. You don't have to rehash the contributions of every single author who's written on your topic. You don't even have to refer explicitly to any of them, though it can be helpful to do so. But be sure you have read them. Be sure you're not plodding clumsily along a well defined path – especially not holding a flag and attempting to claim new territory (or, conversely, stumbling blindly through the wilderness unaware that others have, for sound reasons, marked your chosen path as prone to rockslides). Just because an insight is new to you doesn't mean it's new to the people reading your proposal – and it won't necessarily be new to your audience.

*Take guidelines seriously when writing your proposal and abstract.*

If you have a thousand words, you needn't use every single one of them. However, you should use most of them. Explain why your paper is essential. It is almost impossible to make a compelling case for your paper in five hundred words that will stand up against proposals of nine hundred and fifty words. (Unless, that is, the authors of those proposals commit some of the cardinal sins of proposal writing.)

As a corollary, follow *all* directions for submitting proposals. If the call for papers requires online submission, do not email or fax your proposal to the organizers. If it asks for your abstract in a specific font, or without diacritics, comply. Doing so won't earn you extra points, but failing to do so will get you noticed, and not in a good way.

*Proofread.*

We all make mistakes. One or two typos will not automatically bar you from inclusion. But garbled sentences and more than a few even very minor mistakes will raise serious questions about your competence or commitment.

*Get a second opinion.*

Non-native English speakers should get their proposals checked for clarity of expression. If you do not communicate regularly in scholarly English have your proposal read by someone who does. It is usually fairly clear when proposals are by non-natives. Reviewers make allowances for quirky sentence construction and occasionally awkward vocabulary. However, if the conference is going to be in English, they want to make sure your presentation will be intelligible. Having an intelligible proposal is the best start.

Even if English is your first language, ask a colleague, friend, or long-suffering spouse to read your proposal. If you're a student, ask your advisor. It's part of the job description.

*Never cite Wikipedia.*

You'd think this would go without saying. You'd be wrong.

*Remember the time limit and tailor your proposal accordingly.*

Most paper sessions restrict presenters to twenty minutes. Sometimes they grant twenty five. (If your paper is accepted, you should ask.). This allows for no more than eight to ten double-spaced pages of material. Propose something you can reasonably present in that time frame. You can't compress your entire dissertation or monograph into one conference presentation. A focused proposal will lead to a focused paper.

If your paper is not based on a dissertation chapter or article, you may not have written your paper by the time you write your proposal. This is actually an advantage. Go ahead and write the paper you can present. If you've written a thirty page seminar paper, you cannot present the whole thing. No, not even if you read it very quickly.

If you are presenting from a larger paper, you will need to make appropriate revisions in advance. The moment when you are writing your proposal is a good time to begin. Focus on the key parts of the argument. Select your strongest evidence to explore more fully, and allude briefly to the rest. Make it smooth. Think about the experiences you have had in conferences where speakers ramble about how they have to skip this section and that section, frantically putting pages aside to wrap up their presentations in the given time. If you plan ahead – starting with your proposal – you can avoid being that person. Having a manageable topic that fits the allotted time will let you have a more professional and memorable presentation. As a bonus, approaching your chapter or article this way may help you strengthen it for future publication.

*Proofread.*

*Be aware of sweeping generalizations that will raise hackles.*

With only a thousand words you can't hedge and nuance every single statement. You can, however, avoid phrases like "As everyone knows, orthodox Islam holds belief A." Or "All Christians believe X."

*Choose a methodological voice and stick with it.*

Think about whether you are proposing a constructive theological paper (i.e., you're speaking as a committed Lutheran in order to convince other Lutherans of a particular view about what Lutherans should believe or do) or a scholarly-analytical paper (Why do Lutherans believe as they do? How did they come to believe it?) These are sometimes not completely separable, but you should have your perspective and your objective clear in your own mind before you write. And, if your paper is aimed primarily at your coreligionists, consider whether you are proposing it for an appropriate venue.

*Proofread.*

*Pitch your paper to your audience.*

If you are an Islamic Studies scholar proposing a paper for the more general consultation on religion and law, you will need to define the term *hadith* or use its English equivalent. If you are writing for an audience of specialists in Islam, you needn't do so. In fact, please don't. And you certainly don't have to give a recap of the first two centuries of Muslim history. Or tell your readers who the Prophet Muhammad was. Truly, it's not necessary.

This rule can also be summed up as: don't insult your reviewers' intelligence.

*Have a descriptive title.*

Your title should be specific enough that proposal reviewers, and eventually conference attendees consulting the program book, know what you'll be discussing. "African American Christianity" is not sufficiently descriptive. Neither is "Islamic Theology." On the other hand, just naming a thinker or text without some attention to your particular topic is not much better. As with the proposal itself, strive for a happy medium between big picture and specific focus.

*Tailor your proposal to the conference*

Proposals should highlight those elements of your paper most relevant to the conference's or panel's theme.

If your proposal is for a conference that you attend regularly, go to the business meeting for your group or section. Surprisingly few people attend business meetings. If you go you will have a step up on your colleagues. You will know exactly what the group or consultation is looking for in paper sessions or pre-arranged panels for next year. Organize your work to address what the

group wants to improve your chances of getting your paper accepted. Better still, propose a panel on your general topic. If accepted by the group, you would then organize a pre-arranged panel on that very topic.

*Some additional guidance for proposing a paper panel:*

Make sure the papers go together. This sounds obvious but it's not. Pay attention to methodological and topical coherence as well as breadth.

Be aware of diversity. In addition to being conscious of scholars' gender, racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds, consider professional diversity. Try to engage at least one senior scholar and one graduate student. Consider the types of institutions people come from – small colleges, large research institutions, varied geographic locations. All of this will help make for a more lively session as well as give you a chance to connect with other scholars.

Once you have the panel approved, collaborate. The best panels are those in which there is the most coordination between panelists, including the chair. Correspond by email. Consider reading each other's papers in draft form along the way. Include the respondent for at least the latter part of the process. The more cohesive the panel, the more productive the scholarly exchange between presenters and audience, resulting in a genuine conversation rather than narrow questions to individual presenters. The most satisfying panels are ones in which one could imagine the papers published together as a coherent book or pamphlet.

*If your proposal is accepted*, read Mary Hunt's presentation guidelines "Be Brief, Be Witty, Be Seated" ([here](#)).

*If your proposal is rejected*, you may be able to get feedback to help you in future submissions. You can send a politely worded email asking for suggestions to the conference organizers or the section steering committee chairs, although depending on the number of submissions, you may not get a detailed response or even any at all. If you followed the advice above (in brief, have something important and relevant to say and say it clearly and succinctly), there's a good chance it was simply a matter of numbers. Most conferences receive far greater numbers of good proposals --not to mention indifferent or outright lousy ones -- than they can include. Perhaps your paper didn't fit naturally into a panel with other submissions. It could also be that the proposal wasn't as strong as it could have been. Review your proposal, improve it, and resubmit it. Before reapplying to the major conference in your field, consider smaller venues such as regional meetings or graduate student conferences.

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These guidelines have been immeasurably improved by corrections and suggestions offered by generous colleagues. Further comments welcome to [ka@bu.edu](mailto:ka@bu.edu).

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