

The Effective Conference Proposal

A How-To Guide for Teachers

By Sierra Tiegs September 2010



“Readers are looking for an interactive presentation, not just a lecture.”

Dawn Reed, high school English teacher

Why Write a Conference Proposal?

Every year, conferences are held all over the world for various areas of study, research, and occupation. Teacher conferences are among the more frequent and regularly attended conferences. When teachers register for these conferences, they expect to take something valuable away from the presentations and be able to apply it in the classroom. The presentations are held by teacher colleagues around the nation and globe who want to share a topic or study to benefit students and their education. The *conference proposal* is a short report of what the writer plans to do or share in the presentation they wish to lead; it allows the conference organizers choose which presentations best meet the goals of the conference.

What are the Judges Looking for?

The reader of the proposal depends on the type or size of the conference itself, according to Michigan high school English teacher, Dawn Reed. As both a reader and writer of conference proposals, Reed asserts that readers may be leaders of the organization or other teachers who volunteered for the job. It may also be a team of people or an individual who reads the proposal. This being said, the writer of the proposal needs to take into account the needs of both the reader of the proposal and the audience members of the presentation.

Dawn Reed, who received an MA in Rhetoric and Writing at Michigan State University says, “readers are looking for an interactive presentation, not just a lecture.” Audience members want to learn through participation and practice how to effectively apply the ideas and teaching strategies presented. Proposal readers are also looking for proposals that fit the overall theme and meet the goals of the conference. For example, writing a proposal for a presentation about reading classic novels would not fit the overall theme of a conference about technology in the classroom. Also, focusing on popular theories or current topics is another way to intrigue readers and potential audience members.

BENEFITS of Writing a Conference Proposal

- ⇒ The chance to lead a presentation at a conference
- ⇒ Builds credibility among colleagues, employers, and parents
- ⇒ Shows professionalism
- ⇒ Networking
- ⇒ Builds confidence as a teacher

Quick Tips for a Successful Proposal

- Keep it short and concise.
- Use clear but clever wording.
- Start with an intro that will grab the reader’s attention.
- Don’t go over the maximum amount of words allowed.
- Submit your proposal before the due date.

What are the Basic Components of a Proposal?

Conference proposals are short, concise, and grab the reader's attention quickly, says Richard Siegesmund, who writes for the National Art Education Association. To keep the proposal concise, these three basic components should be included: the title, the abstract, and a short annotation.

Title. The *title* of the proposal should grab the reader's attention while also being an adequate description of the presentation (Steele and Classen). In one of her own proposals, Dawn Reed uses humor and clever wording to attract an audience—*How many cups of coffee does it take to be the Compleat Teacher: The First Year?* This title gives readers and potential audience members a small and appealing glimpse into Reed's presentation about the first year of teaching.

Abstract. The most important part of a proposal is the *abstract*, which gives a concise but detailed description of the presentation. In the abstract, two questions should be answered:

- What are you going to do in your presentation?
- What will audience members take away?

Audience members should feel that attending this presentation will be practical and benefit them in the classroom. Mentioning any special guests or free resource materials is another way to appeal to conference attendees. The usual length of a proposal is 250-300 words. Staying within the word limit is essential to making the proposal short and easy to read. Those choosing the proposals may bypass a proposal that is too long or filled with unnecessary jargon.

The goals and theme of the conference should also be represented in the abstract. People choosing the conference proposals should read that the proposal clearly fits the overall aims and ideas of the particular conference.

Annotation. Similar to the abstract is the *annotation*. The annotation is an even shorter description of the proposal, containing no more than 2 or 3 sentences. This short paragraph will usually go into the printed conference program, which lists all topics being presented during the entire conference. The annotation should be worded specifically for convincing audience members to attend the presentation.

The Successful Proposal. The key to a successful proposal is keeping it short and using clever wording to draw in readers. According to Reed, both readers and audience members are looking for interactive presentations focusing on interesting topics. Presentations based on new research findings and current education topics are more likely to appeal to teachers than will old, overused topics. Another tip, offered by writer Craig Brewer, is to submit the proposal before the due date. Judges reading through hundreds of proposals are more likely to thoroughly read earlier submissions.

Because of her frequent exposure to proposals, Reed has discovered that writing a proposal is an excellent way to begin networking with professionals nationwide and building credibility with parents, employers, and colleagues. By writing a proposal, one can demonstrate their passion and concern for education and have the potential to benefit teachers across the globe. **For examples of proposals, please see the following websites:**

- http://netfiles.uiuc.edu/k-lee7/www/kesl/writ/conf_prop2.htm
- english.okstate.edu/orgs/egsa/conf_proposals.htm

Dawn Reed has written several proposals, but she has also read over 100 proposals to be selected for various conferences. Having earned an MA in Rhetoric and Writing at Michigan State University (MSU), she is now affiliated with the Red Cedar Writing Project associated with MSU. She is currently a full-time English teacher at Okemos High School in Okemos, Michigan.

Questions to Ask When Writing the First Draft

- What will my participants take away from my presentation? Can it be applied in the classroom?
- Am I effectively using the time allotted in my presentation?
- Does my proposal meet the goals and themes of this conference?
- Is my proposal interactive or is it simply a lecture?
- Is my proposal following a code of ethics?
- Am I using effective writing skills and rhetoric?

Ethics and Proposals

Above all, Dawn Reed says writers should "respect the privacy of students, parents, employers, and colleagues by not naming names or slandering specific people or schools" in their writing. If the writer wants to address a problem in the education system, it should be done in a tactful and optimistic manner. Being aware of the audience's needs and avoiding manipulative tendencies are also top priorities when writing a proposal. A list of ethics may also be found on the conference website or proposal submission form, according to Reed.

Q: What if my proposal is not chosen?

If a proposal is not chosen for a certain conference, the writer should not see it as a sign to give up. Did the proposal meet the goals of the conference? Was the wording not clear enough or did it deter away from the proposal itself? Was the proposal presenting a lecture or was it interactive?

Writers are encouraged to try other conferences, collaborate with others for a group proposal, and look for current topics on which to present. A proposal denial is not a sign that the writer is incompetent; it simply means rethinking and re-editing should be done before submitting it to another conference.

References

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