

Conference Abstracts

by Pamela Pierce

Conference abstracts serve two purposes: (1) they assure the conference organizers that you are professional and have something interesting to say, and (2) they serve as an invitation for other conference participants to come hear the issues you've been pondering, researching, and analyzing. They summarize your work, tell its future directions, and tell why the topic is important. Depending on the organization, abstracts of 250–500 words are usually submitted about four months before the actual conference. For instance, each year the Western Literature Association (WLA) asks that a 250-word abstract be submitted on or before June 15 for a conference usually held at the beginning of October. The earlier you submit your abstract, the more time you have to make sure the abstract was submitted without any problems.

A good title for your paper not only serves as a way to concisely tell the main idea of your research, but it promotes your presentation within the conference program, so take some time to write a compelling title that accurately reflects all the important aspects of your paper. It's also worth remembering that once you select a title, you probably won't be able to change it and that it will also become a part of your CV. The title "From the Log to the Blog: Negotiating Historical Borders in Time and (Cyber)space," from the 2008 WLA conference, is a good title because it's clever enough to attract interest while also clearly stating the central subject.

Looking at examples of conference abstracts can inspire you. Most scholarly organizations have past conference programs online, and the Western Literature Association programs can be found at <http://www.westernlit.org/past-conference-programs/>. Your space is limited, so make every word count. The first sentence should entice the reader, making them interested in your topic. An abstract for the 2009 Intermountain Graduate Conference (IGC) started with, "For

fifteen years, I have been obsessed with the Donner party, but not until recently did I understand why.” This example gains the reader’s interest by posing a question—why was this person so interested in the Donner party? Usually your first reader is a member of the organizing committee assigned to read perhaps hundreds of abstracts, so a strong opening line can immediately make yours stand out. When trying to think of a dynamic first sentence, try to come up with an interesting fact that makes your project distinctive. In an abstract for a regional graduate conference, the following first sentence was used: “In southern Idaho and throughout the West, small farms, worked sometimes for generations by the same family, disappear through changes wrought by industrialization and modernization.” Then state why your topic matters. In my abstract for the 2009 WLA conference, the first sentence reads, “The Women’s Land Army, an international organization of women who worked on the farms, emerged in the United States during World War I as a way to ensure that food production was maintained during the war.” This kind of opening offers a definition for a topic that is unfamiliar to most readers.

The main goal of the abstract is to impress upon the organizing committee that your topic matters. Some prospective presenters prefer to quote from sources in their abstracts. I try to use quotes sparingly in an abstract because I want to demonstrate that I have something new to say, not that I know what everyone else has said. One way to do this is to pull together some of the more fascinating elements, as I did with the following: “This essay is part of a larger project that will analyze additional areas of Women’s Land Army visual culture including a Broadway play, window displays, minstrel shows, film, and photographs.”

Graduate students often submit abstracts for papers they’ve already written in seminars, and many students use the papers they’re writing for classes as part of their thesis (Matt Lavin talks more about this idea of “doing double duty” in the second issue of *In Medias Res*). If you’re still

working on the thesis, conference presentations can be an excellent way to get feedback as you continue your work. However, it's also acceptable to submit abstracts for papers that are not yet written. Just remember that the final product should not differ greatly from the general themes presented in the abstract.

Many first-time presenters wonder how important it is that their presentation fits with the conference theme. While it's important to fit your paper with the organization's mission (do not submit a paper about British lit to the WLA conference, for instance, just because you might want to go to a local conference), directly addressing the conference's theme of the year isn't absolutely essential. It's helpful if you can highlight your connection to the theme because that will increase the likelihood of getting accepted to the conference. It may also make the committee's job easier when they are trying to construct panels for the conference. However, if your ideas are original and well stated, then the conference will still be interested in your writing. For the first few attempts, try and find a graduate student-friendly conference like the annual WLA gathering.

Note

Examples were used from the following authors: "From the Log to the Blog: Negotiating Historical Borders in Time and (Cyber)space" was the title of Utah State University graduate student Allyson Jones's 2008 WLA conference presentation; the example on the Donner party was the first sentence from Utah State University graduate student Diane Bush's paper "The Crossing," presented at the 2009 Intermountain Graduate Conference; the example on the industrialization of farms was the first sentence from University of Utah graduate student Diane Fouts's presentation "Land of Home: Expanding Sense of Place to the Global Scale" at the 2009 IGC.