Tips for Submitting a Successful New Horizons Proposal

An important part of the work completed in academia is sharing our scholarship with others. Academic conferences such as the VCCS New Horizons conference provide such opportunities. The point of conference presentations—indeed the point of scholarship—is to move the discussion forward. A good conference presentation makes a valued contribution. That anticipated contribution is evident in a well-written proposal. When thinking about submitting a proposal, one of the first questions we must ask ourselves: Is this really going to make a valued and valuable contribution, or am I just eager to present something?

The New Horizons Program Committee will be looking for a balance of sessions. Proposals from inexperienced as well as experienced presenters, researchers, and practitioners are earnestly solicited. Your proposal will be evaluated by members of the Program Committee using these standards identified in the New Horizons Proposal Rubric.

Other tips to consider when writing your proposal:

1. Read the call for papers carefully and orient your topic of presentation around the conference purpose and goal. Note submission deadlines and submit prior to that date. Every year there are changes, so review proposal information carefully, even if you've submitted a New Horizons proposal before.

2. Begin with the end in mind. Carefully review the proposal rating rubric. What would you need to do in order to be sure that your proposal received a high score in each category? Write your session description with the rating rubric in mind but remember, you will be expected to deliver what you promise.

3. When thinking about your approach, remember: 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. Identify what you bring to this topic that is new, novel, innovative, and important.

4. When framing your idea, keep the multidisciplinary nature of your audience in mind. Proposals should reflect outcomes that are original and innovative as well as important and interesting to scholars who might be outside your specific area of teaching and research.

5. Learn as much as you can about the conference audience. Consider your future audience carefully in order to determine both how specific your topic can be and how much background information you need to provide in your proposal.

6. Learn as much as you can about the event. Explore the event as you consider your own potential to make an impact. How will your experiences or institutional demographic add value to this event?

7. If you have previously spoken on or submitted a proposal on the same topic, you should carefully adjust it specifically for this conference, this year, and to reflect originality and currency. Your proposal should be based on your changing and evolving research and experience.

8. Your proposal should be developed based on adult learning principles, also known as learner-centered learning. What will be your key takeaways? How can you actively involve participants? How does your audience impact your session plan? Identify creative strategies that will help set your session apart.

9. Before choosing your proposal topic, carefully review and consider the following:
   - If your preferred topic is "tried and true," what new and different perspective could you offer?
   - How narrowly and deeply could you focus your topic to explore its underlying implications?
   - How might your topic be transferable to new areas of application?
   - How might you uniquely approach the way you deliver the content?

10. The topic you are proposing should be one that you can cover easily within the targeted time frame. In addition, select session format(s) and methods of delivery that best address your learning outcomes. Panel or roundtable? Face- to-face, online, or both?

11. Consider guidelines carefully and seriously when writing your extended abstract. If you have two thousand words, you needn't use every single one of them. However, remember, it is almost impossible to make a compelling case for your proposal in fifty words that will stand up against proposals of two hundred fifty.

12. Polish your writing.
   - Phrase your proposal clearly and specifically, avoid jargon, and clarify terminology that requires explanation.
   - Have a point and articulate it clearly. Your goal is to be understood by your colleagues. Your focus should be clear, your support compelling, and your outcomes evident.
   - Use 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. A general rule of thumb is that your title should capture, in 10 words or less, who your session is for and the topic that will be covered.
   - Remember that reviewers have to read a large number of proposals and will appreciate your organization, coherence and clarity.

13. Don't write your proposal online. There are two key written portions of your proposal: the session abstract and the extended abstract. Don't write these in the online submission program. Write them on your computer in your word- processing program. Take some time

to adjust and fine-tune them. When you are completely satisfied with them, and have had time to make revisions, then copy and paste them into the online submission system.

14. Understand the difference between the session abstract and the extended abstract. When you submit your proposal you write up two different summaries of your presentation. One of these, called the session abstract, is a 500- character paragraph that will appear in the conference program book if your presentation is accepted. So the main audience for this short summary is the convention-goers who are trying to decide between multiple events on the program. You want to entice participants to attend your session, but only by giving a clear and accurate description of what you will talk about. However, the reviewers of your proposal will also be basing their evaluation on the 2500- character extended abstract. The main audience for this document are the reviewers of the proposals. In this piece of writing, you want to convince the proposal readers to select your presentation for the conference program. Remember, they will be evaluating it according to the five areas outlined in the proposal rating rubric found in the call for papers.

15. Get a second opinion. Most of us think that our own writing and ideas are pretty good—but we can always benefit from the opinions of others. Print out a draft of your proposal and a copy of the proposal rating rubric. Ask a colleague to review it critically. Incorporate their suggestions into your draft.

Common Pitfalls

Depending on the conference, acceptance rates of proposals might range from about 10 percent to almost 100 hundred percent of submissions. Accordingly, you will receive some rejections to your submissions in the course of your career. These are some of the most common pitfalls:

1. The proposal does not reflect your enthusiasm and persuasiveness, which usually goes hand in hand with hastily written, simply worded proposals. Generally, the better your research or experience has been, the more familiar you are with the subject and the more smoothly your proposal will come together.

2. Similarly, proposing a topic that is too broad or "over done" can harm your chances of being accepted to a conference. Be sure to have a clear focus in your proposal and conduct advance research to determine what has already been done.

3. Your paper might simply have lacked the clear language that proposals should contain. On this linguistic level, your proposal might have sounded repetitious, ambiguous, or simply displayed carelessness and a lack of proofreading, all of which can be remedied by more revisions.

4. The writer may have failed to adhere to the requirements for proposal submissions. 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 there is a deadline, meet it. If it asks for your abstract in a specific font, comply. Doing so won't earn you extra points, but failing to do so will get the proposal noticed, and not in a good way.

5. *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 New Horizons Program Committee Chair, although depending on the number of submissions, you may not get a detailed response. If you followed the advice above, there's a good chance it was simply a matter of numbers and balance of topics. Most conferences receive far greater numbers of good proposals than they can include. It could also be that the proposal wasn't as strong as it could have been. Review your proposal, improve it, and resubmit it next year. Before reapplying to the New Horizons conference, consider smaller venues such as regional meetings or peer group conferences.

Adapted from:

A Kecia. (2009, Oct). *Writing a Successful Annual Meeting Paper Proposal*. [Boston University, conference guidance]. Retrieved from: https://www.aarweb.org/annual-meeting/writing- successful-annual-meeting-paper-proposal

Jauch, M., Brizee A. [Contributors]. (2013, March 12). *How to Write an Academic Proposal.*
Retrieved from: https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/752/01/

J McVeigh (2012, May 16). *Tips on Writing Successful Conference Presentation Proposals*. [TESOL International Convention]. Retrieved from: http://blog.tesol.org/tips-on-writing-successful- conference-presentation-proposals/