

University of Notre Dame Writing Center

“Proposals to Presentations Workshop”  
For Undergraduate Scholars Conference

### **Things to Remember When Writing Your Conference Proposal Abstract**

Your abstract should provide the paper title. Effective paper titles will be clear and catchy: they should attract a reader’s attention but also effectively communicate *what* you will discuss. “*Hamlet’s Dilemma*” doesn’t really give a reader a good sense of your argument but “*Hamlet’s ‘Bare Bodkin,’ Sexuality, and Death in the Conflated Text*” conveys a sense of the text(s) and major themes you’ll discuss. This title will help to orient conference selection committees and, if you are accepted, conference attendees. Many conference-goers select which panels to attend based on panel subject matter but often they will pick panels based on how relevant they find the individual paper titles to be to their fields or personal interests. Note: audiences can be irritated if they attend a panel for an eye-catching, but misleading, title.

Successful individual conference paper proposal abstracts generally do triple-work: they outline the contours of the field, they position your argument or research in relation to that field, and they gesture towards the larger significance of your contribution. When proposing an individual presentation for a conference, your abstract should do more than simply summarize your research. You need to tell a selection committee *what* your presentation will say, but you should also talk about what you contribute to the issues and debates in your field—how does your research interact with the scholarship in the field of sociology or with previous cell biology experiments? How might your experiment inspire subsequent research? As with any academic paper, you should clearly articulate your specific argument or research methods and conclusions.

Next, you should give a sense of how you support your claims or research. This section can be the most challenging because it is difficult to strike the balance of specificity and generality you’ll need for a 250-350 word abstract. Talk about a pivotal scene from a play you are discussing, explain the procedure for your chemistry titration, or outline some of the nuances of your historical argument. In the *Hamlet* example, you might expand on *how* you’ll discuss the broad topics of “sexuality and death,” highlighting the importance of these themes within individual scenes or the text as a whole, but you should *not* cut and paste a close reading from your completed paper into your proposal. It is also a great idea to discuss your research methods in this section: how did you use archives at the JFK Presidential Library in Boston? What did you find there and how did these archives enhance your research paper on the Cuban Missile Crisis?

Finally, you should always be sure to gesture towards the larger disciplinary and/or cultural significance of your work. Why does your research matter and why should people want to hear your presentation? Does it change the way we read *Dracula*, look at *The Last Judgment*, or understand the first phase of the Cultural Revolution in China?

What are the practical real world applications of your acceleration research? Some people also find it effective to mention how a proposal speaks to stated conference goals. This often helps to direct your proposal committee readers, suggesting how your paper will fit with the conference themes or with other proposals. Since the Undergraduate Scholars Conference is a general conference where you may not assume the similar disciplinary background of the selection committee, remember to make your abstract understandable for an audience of non-specialists.

The call for conference papers has given you a checklist on the final page. This asks for additional information regarding your major and your **two** preferences for presentation format. Don't forget to review this checklist so you have provided all information that the conference organizers request. It will also help to review the section highlighting what the "abstract should try to include." We've given you some general advice for how to write a proposal abstract but you should always supplement this advice with whatever specifics are requested.

Don't be afraid to ask for help. Professors within your field are invaluable resources. They already have given conference presentations and can emphasize the specific conventions expected for abstracts within your field. They can help you to figure out how to answer questions during the question and answer section at the conference once you are accepted. It will help to show them drafts of the abstract as well as the paper. The University Writing Center will also be glad to help you see where parts of your abstract (or subsequent paper) are unclear, overly-general, or too specific.

Suggestions for Additional Reading:

<http://writingcenter.nd.edu/resources/index.html>

<http://urc.ucdavis.edu/howtowriteanabstract.html>

<http://www.ece.cmu.edu/~koopman/essays/abstract.html>

<http://www.academic-conferences.org/abstract-guidelines.htm>

<http://www.linguistics.ucsb.edu/faculty/bucholtz/sociocultural/abstracttips.html>