



Creating a Successful Proposal: A Practical Guide



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Introduction

The National Communication Association (NCA) advances communication as the discipline that studies all forms, modes, media and consequences of communication through humanistic, social scientific and aesthetic inquiry.

NCA serves the scholars, teachers, and practitioners who are its members by enabling and supporting their professional interests in research and teaching. Dedicated to fostering and promoting free and ethical communication, NCA promotes the widespread appreciation of the importance of communication in public and private life, the application of competent communication to improve the quality of human life and relationships, and the use of knowledge about communication to solve human problems.

NCA is the largest national organization to promote communication scholarship and education. A non-profit organization, NCA has over 8,000 educators, practitioners, and students who work and reside in every state and more than 20 countries.

To that end, every year NCA invites communication scholars and practitioners to submit their scholarly proposals to the association's NCA Annual Convention. The NCA Annual Convention is both a useful and valuable forum to share, discuss, and critique communication research as well as receive constructive feedback on works in progress. The NCA convention can also offer attendees several academic benefits including, but not limited to: presenting new or student research to established fellow scholars, having the opportunity to network with those in the communication discipline, and learning the latest ideas and trends in communication research and how communication is applied both in and outside of the classroom.

Each year, NCA units and affiliate organizations collectively receive thousands of submissions each year that include individual papers, paper sessions, and panel discussions. These submissions are competitively reviewed by a pool of unit/ affiliate reviewers, acceptance or declined notifications are sent out by unit/ affiliate unit planners, and accepted submissions are scheduled for presentation by the NCA Convention Department.

The following guide provides advice and tips on creating successful proposals for submission. Specifically, the guide will address issues like time management, deadline adherence, concise writing, and panel composition. The guide offers specific suggestions on how to increase the chances that your proposal will be accepted and how to make your proposal a successful presentation after it has been accepted to the convention.

Advice for Creating a Successful Proposal

Start early. The final submission deadline for all proposals is March 26, 2014 at 11:59 Pacific Time. However, successful submitters will begin their work long before this deadline. Putting panel discussion and paper session proposals together involve several steps: approaching prospective panelists, collecting abstracts from each of them, molding papers into a cohesive theme, and contacting and securing commitments from prospective panelists, chairs, and respondents.

Be sure to keep in mind that everyone you deal with will be busy with many other personal and/or professional projects. A good rule of thumb is to make your most generous estimate of how long the submission process will take, then double it, and plan accordingly.

In 2010, we began using an electronic submission system called **NCA Convention Central**. Successful submitters will submit early enough in order to give themselves enough time to become acclimated to working with the system and not wait until the last minute to avoid any potential technical difficulties or have any questions about the system.

NCA must enforce a firm deadline for proposal submissions. The final submission deadline for all proposals is March 26, 2014 at 11:59 Pacific Time. Do not wait until the last day to submit your proposal. If you do, you will invariably find that your institution's server is down, your submission has mysteriously bounced back to you, or some other electronic catastrophe has ensued. Carefully read the directions while in NCA Convention Central and double check your submission(s) by using the system's preview feature. Make sure that you do not submit a proposal with incorrect or missing information. Do not submit the proposal multiple times "just to make sure" that it was submitted successfully. Once is enough. If you submit early and successfully, you will receive a confirmation e-mail from NCA Convention Central indicating that your submission was received and you'll have peace of mind.

Make sure your abstracts and rationales are appropriate in length. Take the time to craft abstracts carefully and refrain from writing them online during the submission process. Most units and affiliates have specific word requirements for both abstracts and rationales. Whether you're submitting an individual paper, paper session or, a panel discussion, be sure to review the call for submissions to make sure you meet the word limit for both abstracts and rationales before crafting them.

Write a high quality abstract and rationale. In addition to the length of an abstract and rationale, it is also important to construct a high quality abstract and rationale. When you're rushing around trying to finish a paper or assemble a panel, it's easy to convince yourself that filling out forms and assembling individual paper abstracts for your paper session is enough to add up to a good proposal. If, however, you were faced with the task of reading several

hundred proposals, you'd realize right away that it is cogency, not bulk, that impresses reviewers. The best paper and panel proposals begin with a clear and concise abstract and rationale. For paper session proposals, abstracts should successfully connect all the session's proposed individual papers to an overall theme. Rationales should be crafted in a way that highlights the significance and relevance of the proposed submission. Specifically, proposals that make the biggest impression on reviewers tend to be papers and panels that identify and try to answer challenging questions about the state of the Communication discipline that relates to the particular unit or affiliate they are submitting to. Finally, submitters should be sure that they address any items asked of them in a unit's or affiliate's call for submissions.

Choose the best possible chair and respondent. For many submitters, choosing a chair and/or respondent is the most daunting aspect of putting a paper session or panel discussion together because it involves approaching a well-known scholar or educator and asking them for a favor. Hard as it may be to do this, steel yourself to make the effort, because making the right choice will: 1) help you draw a good audience, 2) let you bring your work to the attention of a scholar you want to get to know, and 3) help produce lively discussion at the session or panel.

Accept the fact that it may take more than one try. If you want to make your request one that they will accept, you need to give them enough information to really capture their interest. Instead of calling them out of the blue, send them, well in advance, a copy of the materials you've collected, including paper abstracts (for paper sessions), panelist information, and the panel abstract and rationale that brings it all together, then call to talk it over with them. Most scholars will help you if they can, so remember that if they do turn you down, it may be for reasons (like illness, family commitments, lack of funding) that have nothing to do with you or your panel. Be prepared to try again if necessary. Except in the most exceptional circumstances, it's entirely inappropriate to choose a good friend, your advisor, or a faculty member from your institution. Also, remember that it is not acceptable to submit a chair and/or respondent name without the person's approval.

Make your panel as diverse and interdisciplinary as possible. A single-institution program or proposal (in which all presenters are from the same institution) is better undertaken at an individual school rather than at a national convention with limited programming slots. Also, reviewers can and do favor panels that assemble participants from a variety of disciplines and backgrounds over panels on which the participants come from the same discipline, background, or institution.

NCA has hundreds of members from around the globe and many of us have close relationships with colleagues from non-U.S. institutions. Submitters should work to engage participation from outside the States.

Meet requirements set by NCA. NCA requires that no submitter submit the same individual paper or panel proposal to more than one NCA unit or affiliate division. Units and affiliates will refuse to consider proposals from any person whose name appears on the same proposal, so

submit the same proposal to only one unit. The paper or panel you propose must be new and original. You should never plan to give the same paper, published or not, at two different conventions, and you should never submit proposals for the same panel to two different conferences at the same time. Finally, all audio-visual requests must be made at the time of submission. Due to the excessive amount of requests, late requests cannot be accommodated. NCA is currently working on “Professional Standards for Annual Convention Participants” that will further clarify these expectations. The document can be found in the NCA Convention Resource Library (www.natcom.org/conventionresources)

Accepted: Presenting a Successful Proposal

Once your individual paper and/or your panel has been accepted for presentation, turn your attention to the next challenge - making the presentation itself a success. There are some simple but effective things you can do make your presentation a good one:

Keep your commitments. Make your travel and hotel reservations well in advance and allow plenty of time for travel emergencies. Visit the “Hotel and Travel” page on the NCA convention website. If you think or know you’re not going to be able to go to the convention, please don’t submit a proposal in the first place. By the time your paper and/or panel has been accepted on the program, the other panelists are depending on you, and your panel is taking up space that could have gone to other worthy scholars. If you must withdraw from a panel or presentation, make sure you notify your unit planner, all the other panelists, the session chair and the NCA National Office and do so the moment you know you have to withdraw.

Stick to page and time limits for presentation. Before you submit your individual paper or panel proposal, please read the call for submissions carefully. Most of the calls will indicate page limits and other requirements for submissions. If you have any questions about submission requirements, please contact the unit’s or affiliate’s program planner for clarification. Each session time slot is 1 hour and 15 minutes long. Once you discover how short a time that really is- and how difficult it is to say anything of substance within its limits- you’ll probably be tempted to present a longer paper. Resist the temptation. The other panelists will think you’ve been unfair to them and if you go so far overtime that there’s no time left for discussion, you will have single-handedly turned the panel into a bad experience for the audience. The best way to avoid these dangers is to make your paper the right length in the first place. Rehearse your presentation out loud and time yourself. If it is too long, cut.

Upload the exact paper or panel you intend to present. Do not present a different version, because if you do, your respondent might end up in the embarrassing position of commenting on a section of the paper no longer included. Conversely, do not remove important and relevant information from your presentation that was highlighted in your uploaded document(s). Instead, submitters should plan to present the material given to their respondents when they uploaded their final revised document(s). Respondents will review these materials in advance and prepare specific questions and comments for presenters. All submitters will have the opportunity to upload a final revised version of their paper or panel proposal. Revised proposals can be uploaded to NCA Submission Central in August/September.

Give your chair and respondent a chance to do their best for you. If your chair or respondent doesn’t get in touch with you, get in touch with them yourself - more than likely, they’ve been given a wrong or outdated address and are as eager to find you as you are to find them. If you experience difficulties in contacting them, please contact your unit or affiliate

program planner for assistance. Once you're in contact, send your chair a copy of your C.V. for use in introductions.

Review the papers of your co-presenters. No professional association we know of requires you to do this, but it's one of the best ways we know to encourage effective discussions. If the panelists are familiar with each other's papers, they can point out connections and contrasts that will bring the whole panel together and enliven the discussion section, making the whole experience much more pleasant for the audience.

Don't forget the audience. Remember that oral presentations are - or at least should be - different than written texts. Ask a friend to listen to your presentation so you can be sure you've provided enough directional signals that the audience won't get lost. If you're a nervous speaker (and in the beginning almost everyone is), practice giving your presentation out loud so that you can make sure you're not speaking too fast or in a monotonous voice. The more details you work out before the convention, the more likely it is that during the presentation, you'll be able to concentrate on what's really important- the interchange with other scholars and the audience that makes for a really good session.