

Suggestions on How to Write a Successful Session Proposal

By Joyce M. Gleason, Educational Consultant

For many NSTA members, having a session proposal accepted at an NSTA conference is not only an honor, it is their ticket to attending the event! Thus, for first-time and veteran presenters alike, understanding the review and selection process is both helpful and advantageous.

As the program coordinator for the 2008 NSTA national conference in Boston, for which over 2,000 proposals were reviewed, I would like to make the following suggestions on how to submit a winning session proposal:

Pay close attention to the proposal submission format. Follow all the instructions on the NSTA site completely and carefully. Finish every section appropriately. If you are not certain that you know what information is being requested in a section, correspond with NSTA.

Your submission is one of hundreds, even thousands, that will be read by a committee of volunteer proposal reviewers. After reading hundreds of proposals, reviewers tire of incomplete or inaccurate information. They will not want, nor should they have to, decipher your intent. If there is someone whose proposal is likely to be rejected, it is the individual who has not provided clear and accurate details.

Of the various sections, pay particular attention to the “brief description.” This is the portion of your proposal that will be printed in the conference program. Keep it brief but informative and stick to the maximum word count. Also, draft your “abstract” carefully. Ultimately, this is where the reviewer will be persuaded that your session will be a valuable contribution to the conference. A proposal without an abstract is doomed for the rejection pile. If you, the submitter, did not care enough to complete an abstract, why should the reader?

Submit on time! Every year I become excited by what I see and hear at NSTA conferences. I am often inspired to submit proposals myself. But every proposal writer must be alert to submission deadlines.

For the three fall regional conferences, the submission deadline is the January 15 preceding the meetings. However, in the case of national conferences, the deadline for

submission proposals for the next year's national conference is frequently within two weeks of the current year's national conference. This schedule does not leave much time for planning and writing a well-conceived proposal. Plan early!

Keep in mind that proposals received close to deadline must compete with all those proposals submitted earlier. By the time your session is read, reviewers may be fatigued. If the proposal is not complete or is similar to other sessions already read, it may fail to stand out in the reviewers' minds.

Catchy titles only work if your proposal gets accepted. While a zingy title might attract conference attendees, your session will never even appear on the program if it has been unfavorably reviewed. Be sure that the proposal itself is comprehensive and complete, with all sections accurately finished.

Do not "force-fit" your proposal into a strand. While strands are a boon to conference attendees, offering the ease of attending related sessions on a single topic, they do not increase the submitter's chances of acceptance. In fact, unless your topic is a dead-on match for the strand, your proposal has a significantly poorer chance of being accepted within the strand than it would if you submitted it as a general non-strand session. Strand proposals are reviewed by designated strand coordinators, and only a limited number of sessions are accepted for each of them.

Until working as Program Coordinator I never knew this myself. I always thought that I had a better chance of being accepted as a presenter within a strand. That simply is not the case. Consider carefully whether your topic really matches the strand description and only submit for a strand if it truly does.

Do not offer a short course proposal unless you and/or your colleagues are a recognized name or entity. The purpose of short courses is to provide an extended presentation (several hours) with in-depth content or pedagogy. Attendees have very high expectations for a short course since they are devoting much precious conference time and also money to this type of offering.

The proposal should be presented by a group of colleagues from a known organization and feature cutting-edge material. It is the rare individual who can carry such a burden. The likelihood of a single individual being able to conduct such a session

is low. Reviewers know this and are unlikely to be swayed by a person's "successful strategies from my many years in teaching."

Do submit proposals for conferences! The strength of a conference derives from the thousands of interested and interesting presenters. As a professional you have much to share with colleagues from around the country and the world. You will learn and grow simply from the experience of presenting. Frequently the interaction among the attendees at a session will enrich the presentation and the presenter.

Additionally, many administrators are persuaded to support a teacher who has gained a coveted presenter's slot at a national or regional conference. Some will even support your attendance financially. Minimally, they are likely to guarantee a substitute for your classes while you are away.

Even if your proposal is not accepted, the process of proposal writing is a valuable exercise and stretches you professionally. It is part of your personal development.

Ultimately, though, do not doubt yourself. The opportunity of presenting at an NSTA conference provides so many advantages. If you are still not certain if you should present, go ahead and submit a proposal!