

How to Write a Conference Paper Proposal

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In advance of a conference, you will be asked to submit a brief document describing research that you plan to do but may not yet have even started. This document is generally called a “proposal” (It differs from an “abstract,” which usually involves summarizing finished research.)

How do you go about writing about research you haven’t yet completed?

Proposals are drafts. They are versions of what you think you will be arguing. In that sense, they are like road maps for your future scholarly journey. Even so, proposals do not include a lot of language of doubt, just as any driving directions would not tell the traveler, “You could turn either left or right here, depending.”

In a proposal, you can certainly say, “In this paper, I argue” or “I will argue,” but you do not say, “I think I’ll argue” or “It’s possible that I’ll end up concluding.” Make a solid guess about what you will end up concluding, in authoritative language. (It is okay if your paper changes its argument between the proposal stage and its coming to fruition! That happens a lot.)

In some cases, you might not know enough yet to make a good guess about what you will argue—or, perhaps, what you will conclude. In that case, it’s fine to present your work in the form of a sophisticated question, such as “In this paper [or project], I ask [or seek to explain] [something intelligent here]?” This approach may be especially useful if you can show that you are very familiar with the central debates and questions in your specific topic of study.

What makes an effective proposal?

What you are trying to demonstrate in the brief space of a proposal is 1) that you are engaged in original research, 2) that you are contributing to an ongoing critical conversation that will be of interest to your peers, and 3) that you can write lively, complete, authoritative-sounding sentences and submit a document with an appropriate beginning, middle, and end.

TIPS

- Keep it short.
 - You are aiming to complete a one- to two-page double-spaced typed document (250-500 words). Follow their directions as to length!
- Include a title
 - The best titles are those that suggest not just a topic but an argument.
- Start right away with your claims or questions.
 - No room for introductory flourishes or anecdotes. Just begin!

- Show that you know that you are joining an ongoing conversation, without letting previous critics or other authorities have the floor.
 - Make your argument or your way of using someone else's concept-- and not other critics' names or quotations from their work—the subject of your sentences.
- Don't wait until the end of the proposal to describe your anticipated argument.
 - No room for or need for suspense.
 - Your argument should structure all that is to follow in the document.
- When you have a proposal draft, ask yourself if someone reading it could complete this sentence, based on what you have written (from *The Craft of Research*). Your reader should be able to answer all parts of this!

This writer is studying _____

(TOPIC)

because he/she is trying to discover _____

(QUESTION)

in order to understand _____

(PROBLEM)

so that _____

(SOLUTION/ARGUMENT)