

Tips for Writing a Successful Convention Proposal

by [Diane Carter](#)

On the drive home to Indianapolis, Indiana from my first TESOL convention in Chicago in March 1988, my colleague and I decided that we would write a proposal for the 1989 TESOL convention to be held in San Antonio, Texas. Colleagues who had been attending TESOL conventions for years were not particularly encouraging about our proposal being accepted, but we knew that we certainly wouldn't get accepted if we didn't try.

You may be in a similar state of mind: You hope to submit a proposal that will be accepted for presentation at the annual convention, and you'd like some suggestions about how to make that happen. Here are some ideas and recommendations that may help you. Before sharing excellent advice from past convention chairs, I'd like to share my own invented acronym to use for writing, as relevant for proposals as any other kind of writing: PARCOS: **P**urpose, **A**udience, **R**esources, **C**ontent, **O**rganization, and **S**yle.

Purpose

Do you want to share information, persuade or motivate your audience to try a different approach to some task, or take them through a process? You will especially want to consider which of the possible formats for presentation best suits your purpose (a regular presentation, a panel session, poster session, or perhaps a workshop). Learn about the session types on the [Call for Participation](#).

Audience

For TESOL, your audience will likely be focused on a specific [interest section](#) (IS), to which you will submit your proposal. The selection of the appropriate IS for your topic is one of the most crucial parts of proposal submission; your presentation must have relevance to that IS. Think about the "hot topics" of this IS when developing your proposal. You also want to think of your audience in terms of demographics, experience, education level, beliefs, practices, knowledge of the subject, and any other germane information as you shape the proposal. For example: Do likely attendees have large groups of students with various language levels in a classroom, or are they doing research on some aspect of the field in a different setting?

Resources

You must consider physical resources such as copresenters, room size, seating setup, and equipment. Will your physical resources affect the length of your presentation? What will make it lively as well as packed with great information?

Other resources are less tangible, such as information. Talk to members of the IS to which you are submitting. Has this topic been overdone? Is there new research or are there new ways to think about old findings? What is the interest in the topic? Is this a hot topic that could attract a lot of proposals—of which only one or two might be accepted? Find out, so you are informed. There is nothing worse to derail your credibility with a well-informed reviewer than making an

uninformed statement. Talk to others who have presented or attended sessions. Ask what works and what doesn't. Ask which presentations they remember.

Content

Each type of presentation listed on the Call for Proposals has a designated time limit. Which of these will best suit your topic, your audience, and your resources? What information do you want to include, and what can be cut if it doesn't help to accomplish your purpose with the designated audience? It is almost as important to consider what to leave out as what to put in.

Organization

The description of the types of presentations on the Call for Proposals will also help you to plan the organization of the presentation. Workshops differ greatly from discussion. An audience of university teachers may prefer a very different format from early childhood teachers. What will best help you to accomplish your purpose with the audience you expect, and the resources and content you have chosen?

Style

The proposal reviewers will assess your proposal based on a rubric and the appropriateness of your content to the type of presentation. The proposal must be written in clear language that avoids acronyms, slang, and imprecise or vague ideas. Poor grammar, misspellings, and incomplete sentences will usually cause reviewers to question the expertise, and possibly the presentation skills, of the submitter. Clearly explain how you will make the presentation captivating for this particular audience.

Tips From Past Convention Chairs

Former (and illustrious) convention/program chairs agree on several pieces of advice, so, rather than have them repeated below, I'll outline them here:

- **Proofread:** Grammar, spelling, punctuation, and readability count. Be sure to have your proposal looked at by a colleague with strong writing skills and a good critical eye to proofread your proposal.
- **Choose the correct interest section:** Selecting the correct IS to submit to is one of the most important choices you make.
- **Follow directions:** It is essential to follow directions and/or the rubric. Putting in something that is not allowed will disqualify your carefully worded proposal immediately.
- **Seek feedback:** Contact your colleagues, or someone whom you know who has presented before (names and email addresses are in the program book), and request a review of your proposal to obtain feedback for improvement. Have them check to ensure that your ideas are comprehensible, coherent and connected to the theme. If possible, have them score your proposal against the scoring rubric.

- **Accept rejection:** Rejection happens to everyone, even “famous” people (especially because review is blind, and the acceptance rate is about 20%). If your TESOL submission is rejected, do not take it personally. Understand that rejection does not mean the session is not worthy but it can mean simply that there were too many proposals with similar topics—and also remember that the process can be a bit subjective. Space is very limited for sessions, so we do have to turn away good proposals, too, sometimes!

Mark Algren (2003)

Learn from others first. Go to the meetings of your IS if you can. Talk about your presentation ideas and visit with those who have been proposal reviewers for ideas about critical errors and what leads to successful proposals. Read the previous year’s Program Book for topic ideas; also, the abstracts will be good models for you to emulate. Don’t be discouraged if your proposal is rejected: Seek advice on future proposals with an open mind and a willingness to hear critiques. Celebrate when you are accepted, and extend your hand to help the next new proposal writer.

Leslie Barratt (2016)

Prospective proposal writers should read the rubric carefully and obey what it says about length, about giving concrete examples, and about what the audience will get out of it. Clear, simple language is easiest for reviewers to read. People should have others read their proposals—especially non-TESOL people and nonnative speakers—to make sure that they are being clear.

Eric Dwyer (2003)

Your proposal should have a statement relating your topic to its importance in the field, to theory, or to research; a statement describing what you’re going to do; and a statement of what participants will get out of the session.

Recent feedback to the convention planners from attendees is that a great number of sessions, while useful or informational, are still boring. Thus, more and more, readers will be on the lookout for ways in which presentation skills somehow come through in the abstract. If you can convince the reviewers that your writing translates into a captivating hour (or more) of convention presentation, you may have an advantage.

Bill Eggington (2005)

The #1 thing to remember is to select a topic central to the mission and interests of the convention. You can find out what the priorities of the convention are by examining previous convention programs and adapting accordingly.

Ryuko Kubota (2015)

Clarity, focus, and originality are key factors for effective proposals. Think of a topic and content that truly inspire fellow professionals. Craft your proposal by clearly explaining what topic you want to introduce, what the purpose of your presentation will be, in what way the content of your presentation is significant, how you are going to present, and what outcomes you expect.

Suzanne Panferov (2007)

Be sure to review the rubric in advance and meet all of the criteria *but also* be sure to submit addressing the correct IS. If the target audience is not clear, reviewers have a hard time evaluating a proposal.

John Schmidt (2014)

- Start “good and early,” ideally, at least 2 weeks or more before the deadline.
- Consider teaming up with at least one fellow presenter or more and confer repeatedly.
- Print out and carefully read the detailed proposal guidelines, marking key items to remember.
- Review the most recent convention program book for topics of interest. Note titles and summaries that catch your attention.
- Draft, edit, draft, edit, draft, edit your proposal abstract and summary.
- Avoid dull, routine, and wordy text in your abstract and summary, and a dull title.
- Check to make sure that the word count is close to the maximum without going over.
- Attend fully to all categories in the scoring rubric, and then read and score your proposal against the rubric.
- Send it in at least 2 days early to avoid hasty mistakes and technical glitches.

Gertrude Tinker Sachs (2009)

In writing your proposal, start with the big picture, as you need to share and communicate your passion while connecting the passion to the convention theme—how are the two connected? Once you have established this connection, make sure that you check what the literature says about your topic. You are not just speaking about what you have done but also about what others in the field of TESOL say about your topic.

After writing your proposal and seeking and receiving feedback from colleagues, complete your revisions and upload your proposal at least a week before the due date, as waiting for the last minute can invite trouble. Technology is not always reliable. Once you have submitted your proposal, watch for the acknowledgement; if you don’t get accepted, try again until you do. If you are accepted, begin to prepare your presentation, and submit a new proposal the next year and every year thereafter!

Beth Witt (1994, 2002)

Three rules for proposal writing:

1. Follow the directions
2. Follow the directions
3. Follow the directions

The consequence for not following the directions can include rejection of the proposal! Convention planners carefully wrote the directions so that proposals will be evaluated fairly and without bias. *If* you follow the directions set forth for proposal submission, then the important information, your proposal content, will be considered and evaluated for inclusion on the convention program.

Write the proposal summary from the perspective of potential session attendees. What information do convention-goers need to make an informed decision about attending your session? Tell them what they will learn, and how they will learn it. Give them an honest, clear, and straightforward description of the session. Attendees want to be sure that their precious,

limited session time is profitably spent. Be specific, so that attendees who do decide to come to your session will leave feeling satisfied and eager to use the information that you shared with them. It is also preferable to write your summary in an engaging style, and even to demonstrate a sense of humor in your description. Everyone wants to enjoy and have fun learning. Give people a reason to make the choice to attend your session.

I thought you would like to know that sometimes you do get accepted (oh the joy of that first acceptance!). We were successful in our bid for the 1989 convention in San Antonio and were invited to do one of the first PCIs at the 1990 convention. Here I am with colleagues Becky Crosbie and Harriet Wilkins ready for the PCI. I'm the one wearing the blue balloon on my head. And, just so you all know, I had at least five of the people above look at this and suggest edits. Good luck with your submission from all of us!

Diane Carter, 2010 Convention Program Chair

Diane Carter worked in K–12 ESL classrooms for more than 25 years. She has taught at the university level and in workplace adult education programs. She is an advocate for students and teachers, as well as for the profession. She served as TESOL convention program chair in 2010 and on TESOL's Board of Directors 2011–2014. Diane is now working as a coach for mainstream and ESL teachers. She is associate convention program chair for TESOL 2016.