

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH — DEPARTMENT OF FRENCH AND ITALIAN

Guidelines for Sending an Abstract to a Conference

What is an abstract?

The purpose of an abstract is to inform a panel organizer at a conference (or a publisher) about the content of a future paper. It usually fits on *no more than one page*. The length is often specified in word counts by the organizer. The abstract has to be clear, synthetic and straight to the point. On the basis of this short document, the reader should have a specific idea of what you will say in the full-length paper.

There are two ways to write abstracts. The first and easier one consists in proposing a paper that has already been written (for instance a seminar paper): in this case, you have to synthesize your research in a few brief and appealing sentences. The second possibility consists in proposing a topic on which you know you can produce an interesting argument (and already have accumulated notes, quotes, documents, ideas), but where the writing and conceptual articulation still remains to be done. This is obviously more difficult, and writing the abstract is an important step in designing what will be your future argument.

What is the structure of an abstract

A one-page abstract often follows a three-part structure:

Title:

- a) your name
- b) the title of your paper
- c) the title of the panel to which you apply

I. Overall description of your project:

What will be the main issue addressed in your paper? What will you attempt to demonstrate about this issue? All this should be expressed in no more than 10 lines.

II. Main corpus and general trajectory of your argument

What will be your starting point? Which authors/texts/passages will you refer to most often in your argument? What will be your conclusion? In 3 or 4 sentences, give an idea of the progression of your demonstration.

III. Situation in relation to previous scholarship and stakes

Where does your approach (methodology, purpose, orientation) stand in relation to the previous scholarship devoted to this topic? You don't have the time to discuss every scholar or article, but you can indicate briefly what will be the main originality of your argument, compared recent practices or compared to one or two leading names. In a final sentence, suggest some of the larger stakes raised by your argument (beyond your narrowly defined topic).

What is the style of an abstract?

Since you have very little space to synthesize a lot of ideas, your style should be as direct and straight to the point as possible. To maximize readability, it is better to write in short sentences, each focused on one aspect of your project. If you believe an example would help, make sure you present it as briefly as possible, and make sure you specify with perfect clarity what this example illustrates.

You are encouraged to show your abstract to (at least) one faculty member in the department before you send it, so that s/he can help you sharpen its structure or its style, and make it as appealing as possible.

Participating in academic conferences

A large number of academic conferences are organized every year by various institutions. Their formats, sizes and scopes vary greatly. They can focus on a *discipline* (history or literary studies or history of art, etc.), on a *period* (Renaissance, 18th century, 19th century, etc.), on a *theme* (exile, revolution, food, etc.) — or on any combination of the above.

Most conference organizers publish calls for papers about a year before the conference actually takes place. Such calls for papers can be found either on the wall devoted to this function in CL 1328, in professional publications, or on the web. Usually, these calls for papers and announcements are centralized by professional associations (like the MLA or the various "period" associations — see list below).

It is customary to attach to your abstract a cover letter addressed to the chair of the panel. In this letter, you can give some biographical information (including your academic affiliation), and — if you believe it helps — you can indicate the context in which your paper was developed.

When you look at such calls for papers remember that:

- titles of panels are often quite open or vague on purpose: use your imagination to adapt your topic and stretch the title so that they can intersect;
- you should do your best to (re)configure or (re)phrase your topic so that it fits as precisely as possible the title of the panel (or the theme of the conference);
- if you send more than one abstract or if you send a similar abstract to two panels, you have to indicate this fact in each of your cover letters;

You will receive a letter from the chair of the panel (or from the conference organizers) stating whether your proposal was accepted or not. If you do not hear any news and want to know early in time, don't hesitate to contact the chair and ask where things stand.

Writing your paper

If your paper has been accepted, make sure you work on it well ahead of time. There is nothing worse — but, unfortunately, there also is nothing more common — than a paper improvised at the last minute.

Once your paper is written, the main point is to make sure you rigorously observe the time allowance. Make sure you are told by the panel chair how many minutes you will be given, and time yourself reading the paper. NEVER go to a conference with a paper you have not timed to the minute; if you go over your allotted time, you will either appear rude and unprofessional, or your paper will be hurried and lose all its punch. In both cases, you will have lost a lot of your credibility and done a serious disservice to your career.

Send your paper to the chair of the panel — along with your curriculum vitae — at least two weeks before the conference takes place.

CONTACTING SOME PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS**MLA : Modern Language Association**

Address: 10 Astor Place
New York, NY 10003-6981
telephone: (212) 614-6381
email: membership@mla.org
Website: <http://www.mla.org/>

Linguistics : Linguistic Society of America

Address: 1325 18th St. NW, Suite 211
Washington, DC 20036-6501
Email: lsa@lsac.org
Website: <http://www.lsac.org/indextext.html>

American Association for Applied Linguistics

Address: PO Box 21686
Eagan, MN 55121-0686
Email: aaaloffice@aaal.org
Website: <http://www.aaal.org/intro.html>

Middle Ages : Medieval Academy of America

Address: 1430 Massachusetts Ave
Cambridge, MA 02138
Website: <http://www.georgetown.edu/MedievalAcademy/>

Medieval Institute

Address: Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, MI 49008-3801
Telephone: (616) 387-8745
Website: <http://www.wmich.edu/medieval/>

Renaissance : Renaissance Society of America

Address: Casa Italiana Zenilli-Marino
24 West 12th Street
New York, NY 10011
Email: rsa@is.nyu.edu
Website: <http://www.r-s-a.org>

17th century : North American Society for French Seventeenth Century Literature

Address:

Society for Interdisciplinary French Seventeenth Century Studies

Website: <http://www.uga.edu/cahiers/>

18th century : American Society for Eighteenth Century Studies

Address: PO Box 7867
Wake Forest University
Winston Salem, NC 27109
Telephone: (336) 727-4694
email: asecs@wfu.edu
Website: <http://www.press.jhu.edu/associations/asecs>

19th century : Nineteenth Century Studies Association

Address: Phyllis Floyd
Department of Art
Michigan State University
East Lansing, MI 48824-1119
Website: <http://www.gettysburg.edu/nca>

20th century : Twentieth Century French and Francophone Studies

Address:
Contemporary French Studies Network
Website: <http://www.inform.umd.edu/CFSNET>