Strategies for Writing Successful AERA Proposals

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While many American adults look forward to spending the month of July at the beach, soaking up some sun and reading trashy novels as their children splash around, the typical AERA member knows that July is going to be spent chained to his or her desk (or at least linked to a laptop), cranking out one or more paper proposals for the coming year's AERA annual meeting. Why do we academics make this sacrifice? For the faculty member, writing a proposal and presenting a paper at the annual meeting often follows data collection and analysis. Eventually, one or more presentations may be combined to produce a suitable manuscript, which is then submitted for publication. Feedback arising from one's presentation can be incorporated into the eventual journal manuscript. While not counting as a publication per se, national meeting presentations on the assistant professor's vitae are certainly a step in the right direction to tenure and promotion.

For the graduate student, presenting at the annual meeting documents his or her participation in the research enterprise and shows that the individual has research potential. The experience of presenting is a valuable one, and the resulting citation on the vitae is a very real asset when it is time to enter the academic job market. Also, many institutions only provide travel funding if the faculty member or graduate student is presenting a paper at a conference, so successful proposal writing can ensure financial support.

So, whether one is a faculty member or a graduate student, presenting papers at the annual meeting is a worthwhile activity. Given the vagaries of the proposal review process, however, even the best organized researchers, the most gifted writers, and the veritable zen masters of proposal submissions can never be completely confident that any or all of their proposals will be accepted. Individuals who have never submitted a proposal, or perhaps never attended the annual meeting, may view the entire process of writing a proposal and having it reviewed as a vague, mysterious, and byzantine enterprise (which, come to think of it, is absolutely correct).

It may surprise the novice to learn that many regular annual meeting participants have had proposals rejected, even those proposals that we knew represented absolutely cutting-edge, paradigm-shifting research! It is important to recognize the subjective nature of the review process (despite the outward appearance of objectivity). The moral is, don't take a rejection personally. Read the reviewers' comments carefully and think about how you could improve the proposal. Remember that you can always revise and resubmit a rejected proposal for the next annual meeting, so don't give up! The purpose of this article, then, is to offer encouragement and guidance to graduate students (or any aspiring proposal writer) in the preparation of successful AERA proposals.

The authors are by no means experts at this activity. We have, individually and sometimes collaboratively, however, had relatively good success at having our proposals accepted for presentations at annual meetings over the past 15 years, beginning in graduate school (thankfully, we had excellent mentors) and continuing with our own students. We have served as proposal reviewers for Divisions C, D, and E as well as for several special interest groups (SIGs) and have learned much about what qualities are common to outstanding proposals. We also consulted with several individuals[1] whom we knew to have extensive experience preparing proposals for and participating in AERA meetings in order to mine their insights. Several strategies are described, and these are based on what we have learned over the years and our beliefs about the things that one *must* do and the skills one *should* acquire in order to craft proposals that will result in a presentation at AERA's annual meeting. The interested reader is also referred to Cole's (1997) brief article offering suggestions for writing AERA proposals.

Before describing the strategies, however, we will point out some of the problems indicative of a poorly written proposal that is likely to be rejected. Notice that many of these problems have to do with how the proposal is packaged and the overall quality of the writing.

- The proposal reports a "so what?" study: The research is not fresh, original, timely, or significant.
- The field has moved on to other hot topics. The research must be timely and must address an important question of interest to the AERA audience.
- The rationale and methodology for the study are weak.
- There are minimal, if any, citations to lend theoretical and/or methodological support to the study.
- The data are not yet analyzed, or the obtained results are not reported, not significant, or not interesting. Worse yet, the data have not yet been col-

lected (the well-known kiss of death for most proposals).
- The data analyses are inappropriate or not described.
- The conclusions and implications do not follow from the study.
- AERA does not support the technology required for the proposal (e.g., time travel, virtual reality, Internet connectivity).

We will discuss several of these problems in more detail within the context of the following strategies and offer advice regarding planning the proposal, identifying the target audience for the proposal within AERA, connecting one's research with important trends in the field, collaborating with others, organizing symposia and paper sessions, and adhering to the guidelines for proposals.

Strategy Number 1: Learn the Craft

Good writing in a proposal is absolutely essential. You must convince the reviewer of the significance of your research and that the topic will be of interest to AERA members. One avenue for improving your proposals is to attend an AERA presentation or workshop on getting published (Schraw, 1998). Much of the advice that is offered within these sessions about how to prepare manuscripts for publication review should readily transfer to proposal writing.

Your proposal should be engaging, coherent, and address each point of the proposal outline. Avoid esoteric jargon. Proposals should be less technical than a journal manuscript. Remember that AERA reviewers may not know your specific area of research. They are faced with reading a number of diverse proposals and will appreciate a proposal that is clearly written in understandable language. People often try to cram everything into three pages and end up saying too much. Brevity and clarity, on the other hand, really help reviewers who are well aware that they are reading conference proposals and not journal manuscripts.

Frame your work from a theoretical perspective. While you don't have enough space to get into the fine details, if your research has a theoretical foundation, indicate how your research questions derive from the theory. Also, think about the two, three, or four—no more—key points that your work addresses and focus on these ideas. It is best to make a few points that are clearly connected to a theoretical framework and/or previous research. Perhaps more important than citing seminal studies in your field is to cite only research that supports your research questions/hypotheses in the introduction and rationale for your study. Although the description of your research methods and reporting of the results are very important, don't get bogged down in details. An AERA proposal is not your dissertation; you only have three pages to describe your research. You don't have to explain everything. It is permissible to say, "The eventual paper will describe these results, and their implications, in more detail." While this may sound like you are covering for a lack of data, as long as you present a good summary of your most important results, you will likely be okay. On the other hand, promissory notes about work yet to be done, talking about the "pilot" nature of the study, and other equivocal language will doom your proposal.

When discussing the scientific significance or the implications of your research, you need to remind the reviewer why your research is important. Remember that the first task of the reviewer is to be skeptical, so you have to "sell" your proposal. They are more likely to "buy" your ideas if they are interesting, novel, important, and make some contribution to the field. Clearly state what you see as the noteworthy conclusions and educational implications—even when the study hypotheses were not supported. In the latter instance, suggest an explanation as to why you failed to find what you had expected. People who learn from their failures, and can demonstrate why this knowledge is important to advancing the field, are always needed in educational research.

Make your proposal attractive and readable by breaking it up spatially on the page. For example, while you may single space the proposal, leave line spaces between the sections as well as ample margins. Ten- to 12-point font size is acceptable, but no smaller or larger. A good idea is to include data tables rather than simply commenting on your results in the text. Tables work nicely by organizing for display the different experimental conditions, dependent measures, sample characteristics, and results.

Finish a draft of the proposal well in advance of the submission deadline and have an experienced person—your advisor or a colleague—read and review it and give you constructive feedback. Then read and revise the text, tables, and references carefully. Reviewers are turned off by typographical errors, misspellings, and tables and references that don't conform to APA (4th ed.) style. They may think that your research is sloppy because your proposal is sloppy!

Strategy Number 2: Do Your Homework!

Know your audience. Determine which division (and section within a division) or SIG is the most appropriate outlet for your proposal. This is much like targeting a paper for a specific journal. Talk to other people who have presented papers within a given division or SIG. Don't be shy about asking the chair of that division or SIG if your proposal topic is appropriate. Asking for advice is not the same thing as seeking favors or soliciting a promise that your paper will be accepted. But human nature being what it is, chances are if he or she has talked to you, knows your name, and yours is one of those proposals in the "maybe—if there is space" category, the chair will find a spot for your paper. Do not submit the same proposal to more than one division or SIG.

Your chances of success may be better if you submit your proposal to a SIG because there is less competition (but on the other hand, there are fewer available slots for papers). You'll be supporting the SIG through your participation, and you may find a more receptive and appreciative audience. It is not necessary to be a member of the particular division or SIG to which you submit a proposal. However, once your proposal is accepted, you will probably want to join that division or SIG. Getting involved in SIGs, by attending their business meetings and paper sessions, can be very beneficial. SIGS are much smaller than divisions, so you can easily interact with other members. Remember, they are the people who will review your SIG proposals in subsequent years. You may quickly find yourself in a leadership role as a SIG officer, chair or discussant for a session, or a proposal reviewer. (Yes, even graduate students can do these things.)

Strategy Number 3: Jump on a Bandwagon

It might be beneficial to associate your research project with a hot topic in your field. Research that is in line with the current zeitgeist will likely attract the interest of the division or SIG to which you send your proposal. A decade or so ago, research on metacognition, for example, was all the rage; a few years back, everyone was talking about constructivism. Today, equity and education reform seem to be on everyone's lips (and topic descriptors). Proposal topics and lines of inquiry that do not have an obvious "home" within a division or SIG may be orphaned and ultimately rejected—even though these may represent worthwhile research.

This is not to say that you should blindly follow fads in the field; however, to the extent your research is timely, topical, and relevant, you probably have a better chance of presenting your work at the annual meeting. Still, reviewers will almost always reward rigor and significance over faddishness.

Strategy Number 4: Report 'Em if You Got 'Em

Report whatever results you've obtained from your research, even if your study is incomplete and your data are just coming in as you prepare the proposal. If you are fortunate to have a large amount of data and several interesting and significant results, you're not being disingenuous by stating that "The results are too complex to describe in their entirety, but the complete results will be reported at the time of the presentation." In this way, you can summarize your most compelling results within the three-page limit. You could state something like "Preliminary data suggest that. . . ." Assure the reviewer that all your results will *definitely* be available by emphasizing that the study will be completed well before the annual meeting.

If you clearly are *not* going to have your results in and your study completed in time for the conference, it is probably best not to submit a proposal. The exception might be the case where you are using an innovative method or technology or doing something truly cutting edge. And let's face it; how often does that happen? Still, there may be a lot of value in describing what you are doing, even if you don't have complete results. Reviewers and chairs always want to see something new and interesting that shows promise.

Submit more than one proposal if you have the data to support them. But don't dilute your data by trying to stretch one study into two (or more) paper proposals—what journal editors often refer to as dividing data into "least publishable units." Proposals that build an argument based on several related experiments tend to be highly regarded by reviewers. Also, recognize the danger of submitting multiple proposals; if all are accepted, you may be too busy to enjoy the annual meeting!

It is also true that you don't need data in order to submit a proposal. Papers discussing issues and trends in the field, "big picture" ideas, critical insights into theoretical matters, or evaluations of policy certainly have their place within a research conference. These sorts of papers probably work best within a session of similar papers, so consider submitting a symposium proposal for this purpose (see Strategy Number 6, below).

Strategy Number 5: Join a Team

Contemporary cognitive psychologists have described the manner in which knowledge is developed through social interactions—particularly with more experienced others (Rogoff, 1990). The implication is for the graduate student or assistant professor to collaborate with individuals who have experience with AERA (i.e., writing paper proposals, presenting papers, organizing sessions). These people might be your advisor, other professors, or graduate students—either at your institution or elsewhere.

If you are already apprenticing as part of a research team, then it may be a matter of carving up the project so that you can present some of the work. In this regard, you may need to convince your research director that the study or studies should be presented at AERA and that you are the one to do it! After all, you've put in long hours on the project, you're willing to write the proposal, and you're graduating and need to have conference presentations on your vitae. If you are working with someone who doesn't publish much or tends to "sit" on the data, then you probably need to press the matter if the project data are ever to see daylight!

Strategy Number 6: Organize a Symposium (or Alternative Session)

Many annual meeting participants claim that the surest route to "getting on the program" is to organize a symposium or an innovative format. If you do, be sure to invite an established researcher as a discussant. Name recognition doesn't hurt, and in the case of a symposium, the presenters' names are there for the reviewers to see. Or propose a paper session of which your paper is a part and nominate yourself as chair of the session. The usual role of the chair is to run the session by starting on time, introducing each speaker/paper, keeping to the allotted times for the individual papers, and distributing and collecting session evaluation forms.

While one might expect that symposia are of higher quality than individual papers, posters, or roundtables, it does not necessarily follow that symposia proposals are subjected to more rigorous review and so stand a weaker chance of acceptance. In fact, data for the period 1992–96 show that the acceptance rates for symposia, paper, roundtable, and poster sessions are nearly equivalent (AERA, 1998).

It may require more work and organizational wherewithal to put together a top-drawer symposium proposal or another multicontributor session, but this effort is usually worthwhile as, on average, about 56% of symposia proposals are accepted.

The increased diversity of session formats in recent years—the "Image Bank of Session Formats" was introduced for the 1994 meeting—gives one a variety of choices to consider: not only paper and poster sessions, roundtables, and symposia, but also demonstrations, book sessions, interviews (haven't you always wanted to chat face to face with Howard Gardner, Lisa Delpit, or Elliot Eisner?), off-site visits ("Subjectivity, Gender, and Shamu: Deconstructing Children's Questions at SeaWorld"), and performances. These alternative sessions seem to invite creativity and imagination, so if your proposal is clearly out of the mainstream, consider a nontraditional format.

If you are a first-timer at an annual meeting, a roundtable discussion or a poster session may be less stressful venues for presenting your work. A new members category has recently been introduced, and this option allows newer AERA members to present their papers in a poster format on the first evening of the conference. Poster session interactions tend to be one on one with those people who have sought out your poster. Discussions that take place

in front of posters or at roundtables have been known to lead to productive collaborations. And what better way to get involved in your first AERA meeting?

Strategy Number 7: Follow the Directions!

Before writing the proposal, read the "Call for Proposals" from beginning to end, with particular attention to "General Information," "General Procedures," description of session formats, and the guidelines for your division. Note the general criteria that are used to evaluate proposals—regardless of division or SIG. It is helpful to examine some of the forms reviewers use to judge proposals. These forms usually include such criteria as strength of rationale, importance of the problem, rigor of methodology and analyses, interest to AERA members, and so forth. Check with your professors or colleagues; if they have served as reviewers in past years (or currently), they may have some blank reviewer forms in their files and can share them with you.

Adherence to the "Guidelines for Proposal Submissions" is very important. Proposals that run over the page limit, for example, are less likely to meet with a favorable review, no matter how well written and regardless of the significance of the research findings. In fact, such proposals may not be reviewed at all if the chair of the division, section, or SIG is a stickler about following the rules for submissions.

Send the correct number of copies (six, including three blind copies) and everything that is asked for: the proposal summary (two–three typed pages); cover sheet; self-addressed, stamped envelopes; index cards; and so on. Note also that the required materials differ somewhat for individual papers (which *may* have multiple authors) and symposia or multiple-presentation proposals (which have multiple papers). There are different cover sheets for individual papers and symposium proposals. Both are included in the "Call for Proposals." Complete the appropriate cover sheet accurately!

Know the deadline for submissions, and don't miss it! In recent years, the proposal deadline has been on or about August 1st. Missing the receipt date is fatal; many chairs will simply return your proposal to you (at best), or may not acknowledge its receipt at all. Use either a courier service or overnight mail to ensure on-time arrival. If your proposal is going to an international address, overnight mail is likely too little too late. Notice that the deadlines can vary for some SIGs; they may be later than the deadline for division papers—or earlier.

AERA introduced, on a limited basis, electronic submissions via the AERA Web site (**http://aera.net**) in 1996 for the 1997 annual meeting and continued this experiment for the 1998 and 1999 meetings. The advent of electronic submissions is, over time, going to change the way that we all submit our proposals. The rules of the game are not much different, however. The same format is required for an electronic submission. If you can submit an electronic proposal to your division or SIG, you do not need to—nor should you—submit a paper copy.

Try to fit your paper or symposium session proposal in with the theme of the annual meeting. Read the description of the annual meeting theme on the first page of the "Call for Proposals." Usually, the theme is sufficiently broad enough (e.g., "On the Threshold of the 21st Century: Challenges and Opportunities") that you don't have to stretch much to accomplish this. On the other hand, if your paper clearly doesn't relate to the conference theme, don't try to force it; it will seem like a desperate ploy to the reviewer. There is no requirement for paper topics to be explicitly related to the meeting's theme. If you have written a good proposal, your research is timely, the data are valid, and the results contribute to the field, you stand the best chance of having your proposal accepted. It is also important to attend to the topic session descriptors in the "Call for Proposals" and to identify your proposal topic using these key terms. Remember also that AERA is an *educational* research conference, so do your best to relate your proposal to education (at least in the broad sense of learning, thinking, and doing in society, communities, and institutions).

While we have stressed conformity here, it is also important to remember that the "Guidelines for Proposal Submission" are just that—guidelines. There are situations when departure from these directions is appropriate. If your proposal would be better served by being presented in a somewhat different manner from what is called for in the guidelines, don't be timid about varying from the format. But make it clear why you are submitting something different from the official format. It may be wise to contact the division or SIG chair directly, ahead of time, if your approach is particularly novel, such as when proposing an alternative format, session, presentation, performance, workshop, or off-site visit.

Summary

We have attempted to provide the novice with some guidelines for writing a successful proposal for a paper (or other) session at the AERA annual meeting. While there are no guarantees, we have found that the above strategies have served us—and our colleagues—well over the years. Although conformity to the rules of the game is the sine qua non of having your proposal accepted, we also encourage first-timers to think "outside the box" by proposing novel and alternative research paper proposals that contribute to better understanding of the educational process in its myriad dimensions. Ultimately, such proposals make AERA's annual meeting a richer, more stimulating professional conference for all educational researchers.

If you do substantial and significant work that contributes to advancing our understanding of the educational enterprise, the world will come calling. You will be *invited* to talk about your work at innumerable meetings and conferences, and you'll never have to worry about writing a conference proposal again!

One final note to graduate students: You are the future of AERA. You are an integral part of the annual meeting, and your work is valuable. If you don't have a paper or two accepted this year, try again next year and keep trying. Get involved with the Graduate Student Committee! It's a good way to meet other students like yourself, many of whom have presented papers at the conference. Learn from them as well as your professors. And when you graduate and land that first academic job, bring your students to AERA's annual meeting.

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CLASSIFIEDS UPDATE

The *Educational Researcher* accepts text classified advertisements at a rate of $10.00 per line. *Copy for ads must be a single double-spaced paragraph, may be faxed, and must be received five weeks before the first day of the month of issue for single issues, and December 2 for January–February, May 5 for June–July, and July 7 for August–September.* Purchase order or payment must accompany order or an invoicing fee of $5.00 will be added. To be accepted for publication, all employment ads must include a statement that the employer is an Equal Opportunity Employer and must have a deadline for application no earlier than the end of the month of issue (or February 15, July 15, and September 15 for double issues). Headings are subject to editing for brevity and to avoid duplication within an issue. To place an advertising order or to request information or a brochure, contact Dana Cruikshank, Advertising Manager, *Educational Researcher*, 1230 17th St., NW, Washington, DC 20036-3078, 202-223-9485.

Two Positions

Northwestern University, School of Education and Social Policy, **Assistant Professor in Science and Mathematics Learning.** The school is conducting a search for a tenure-track assistant professor in the learning sciences with interest in the teaching and learning of science and mathematics. Particular areas of research may include: study of teaching practice, design of innovative learning environments, technology in reform contexts, and learning in informal settings. This position involves teaching in the school's undergraduate and graduate programs, as well as in the school's teacher-preparation programs. Candidates should send a vitae, copies of publications, statement of research interests and teaching competencies, and three letters of recommendation to Brian Reiser, Chair, Science / Mathematics Education Search Committee, School of Education and Social Policy, Northwestern University, 2115 North Campus Drive, Evanston IL 60208-2610. **Assistant Professor in Learning in Organizations.** The school is also conducting a search for a tenure-track assistant professor with a specialty in learning in organizations. We seek candidates with an interest in how knowledge is developed and communicated in organizations and the way in which organizational environments can support learning and change. Specific interests might include design and study of technological support for organizational change, effects of rapid change in workplace environments, the evolution and diffusion of innovation in corporate and other organizations. Given the interdisciplinary nature of the school, candidates are encouraged to apply who come from perspectives including but not limited to: organizational studies, information sciences, cognitive science, management science, anthropology, or social psychology. Responsibilities will include graduate teaching and advising in the learning sciences program as well as teaching in the school's undergraduate program in learning and organizational change. The position offers the opportunity for broad-based collaboration with School of Education and Social Policy faculty as well as with scholars from Cognitive Science and the Kellogg Graduate School of Management. Applicants should submit a statement of research and training interests, vitae, representative reprints, and three letters of recommendation to Allan Collins and James Spillane, Search Committee Co-Chairs, School of Education and Social Policy, Northwestern University, 2115 North Campus Drive, Evanston, IL 60208. In order to receive full consideration, applications for these positions must be received by February 1, 1999. Starting date is September 1, 1999. Minorities and women are strongly encouraged to

Calls for Applications

The **Society for Research in Child Development** seeks to increase the number of minority student professions in child development careers by hosting at least 20 students and their mentors at its spring biennial meeting in Albuquerque, NM. For information or to refer students, contact LaRue Allen, New York University; **larue.allen@nyu.edu**; or 212-998-5380.

Calls for Proposals

The **Law School Admission Council** Board of Trustees is seeking research proposals on legal education in the U.S. and Canada. Deadline: February 1, 1999. For program announcement, contact Kathleen B. McGeady, Coordinator of Grants and Contracts, Law School Admission Council, P.O. Box 40, 661 Penn Street, Newtown, PA 18940-0040; 215-968-1377; **kmcgeady @lsac.org**; fax 215-968-1169; **www.lsac.org**.

Conferences

The **National Educational Computing Association's** conference "Spotlight on the Future: Technology for the New Millennium" will be held June 22–24, 1999, in Atlantic City, NJ. For information, see **www.neccsite.org**, write to NECC '99 at NECA, 1244 Walnut Street, Suite A, Eugene, OR 97403-2081 or **necc@oregon.uoregon.edu**, fax 541-346-2565, or call 541-346-6322.

Member Publications

John A. Beineke, *And There Were Giants in the Land: The Life of William Heard Kilpatrick.* New York: Peter Lang.

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Notes

M Cecil Smith is affiliated with Northern Illinois University; Russell N. Carney, with Southwest Missouri State University. A somewhat different version of this article was presented by the first author under the title "Does Putting a Colon in the Title Really Help?: Writing Conference Proposals" at the annual meeting of AERA, April 1998, San Diego, CA.

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Cole, A. (1997). Hints for writing successful AERA proposals. *AERA Graduate Student Newsletter, 6*(2), [On-line]. (Available at **http://aera.net/gsc/newsletter/v6n2.html**)

Rogoff, B. (1990). *Apprenticeship in thinking: Cognitive development in social context.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Schraw, G. (1998, April). *How to handle rejection and other helpful hints for getting published.* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Diego, CA.

Members!
Registration Alert

To view the registration information for the 1999 Annual Meeting in Montreal, April 19–23, please see AERA's home page (**http://aera.net**).

Overseas members may request a copy of the 2000 Annual Meeting Call for Proposals now by sending an e-mail message to AERA through the Web site **http://aera.net**. Or send a self-addressed envelope to AERA, Annual Meeting, 1230 17th Street, NW, Washington, DC 20036. The Call for Proposals will appear in the May issue of *Educational Researcher.*