

Creating Stronger AECT Convention Proposals Suggestions from the Program Planning Committee

Many organizations' annual conventions are highly competitive and one needs to submit a strong proposal in order to get onto the program. In recent years, AECT has accepted an average of a little over 58% of proposals across all divisions. Some divisions, however, have accepted as few as 42% of submitted proposals. And these two figures include **all** types of presentations: posters, roundtables, symposia, and concurrent sessions.

So it clearly helps to submit a strong proposal. But what makes a strong proposal? That is, what appeals to reviewers and program planners? What are they looking for and how can your proposal provide what they seek?

This guide is intended to help you prepare the strongest proposal you can. It is organized around a series of principles and each principle is followed by tips. It talks about both style and substance, including how to make your proposal more visually appealing. While some of these tips will require a little bit of technical know-how (like how to insert HTML codes in the online proposal submission form), you can implement most tips with little additional effort

Principle 1: A strong proposal is one that matches the *Call for Proposals* and is well matched to program initiatives and themes.

The best place to start is with the *Call for Proposals* for the convention. This is located on the AECT Web site and is reached through a link from the main page (www.aect.org). You should read it, noting the stated theme (*Strengthening Connections* for Dallas 2006) and any identified sub-themes. (Dallas has four sub-themes.) Look also for any special calls. That is, special program initiatives from the program planners for that year's convention. For example, for Dallas 2006, there are two *STeP* (Special Technology-enhanced Proposal) initiatives listed and there is also a *Call for Featured Research Proposals*. Read through these calls as well. Make sure you understand what they are soliciting and think about how what you want to present at the convention fits into one of these themes or initiatives. It is much less effective simply to write a proposal about what you want to present without connecting it to the themes and initiatives.

Principle 2: Proposals that comply with the stated submission requirements are much more likely to be accepted.

Read over the submission procedures. Note the length limitations. Even if the online submission boxes allow you to go beyond the stated word count, don't. Why not? Well, most reviewers will read somewhere between 4 and 10 proposals. In addition, the program planner for a division is likely to read **all** proposals submitted to that division. Both reviewers and program planners come to have a kind of internal sensor that can detect when a proposal is over the word count. Given that most of them are themselves submitters of proposals, they are unlikely to take well to someone who ignores the guidelines. Suppose they (and others) worked to stay within those guidelines and you did not. Are they likely to think better of your proposal or worse? In addition, a better-edited proposal is likely to be a better proposal anyway. Supposedly, Thomas Jefferson said, "If I had more time, I'd write you a shorter letter." So, take the time to edit.

Principle 3: Reviewers tend to infer that the properties of the proposal will be the properties of the presenter or presentation.

If your proposal has lots of typos and looks thrown together, reviewers are likely to assume you won't take care with your presentation and that you may not pay attention to details or be professional in your approach. If your proposal has a dry and boring style, they will likely assume you are dry and boring. If your proposal is poorly organized, they may well assume you will be poorly organized as a presenter. If your proposal has many English expressional or grammar problems, reviewers may assume you will not speak well or may not be able to present well. Reviewers don't want careless, boring, poorly organized presenters who cannot express themselves well. So, a proposal that has these faults is unlikely to make the program.

Clearly, this means you need to make sure your proposal presents you as someone with desirable characteristics for a presenter. The next four principles look at how you may assure that.

Principle 4: A strong proposal has few errors and looks polished and professional.

If you type your proposal directly into the online boxes, the online system will not do spell-check or grammar-check. Any errors will make it to the reviewer. To prevent this, create your proposal first in a word processor. Microsoft Word, for example, will highlight misspelled words and possible grammar errors, helping you catch them. In addition, you can highlight your proposal's text and then use the *Word Count* tool under the *Tools* pull-down menu to find out exactly how many words you have used (and thus make sure you do not exceed the word limit specified by the guidelines). If you have trouble spotting errors that spell-check and grammar-check don't catch (like using "their" when you mean "there," or omitting words), consider having someone proofread your word-processed document. Often you can make a deal to have a friend who reads carefully do this for some negotiated quantity of adult beverages. Once you know your proposal is free from typos and other problems, highlight it again, copy it, and then paste it into the online submission form.

Now, visual appeal **should** take a backseat to content in reviewing, but reviewers are humans. Humans appreciate good layout. It makes a proposal easier to read. In a subtle way, this may influence reviewer perceptions of the quality of a proposal. Unfortunately, our current online submission form does not allow you to paste a word-processed document into the form and retain its character formatting (font, type size, bold, italics, underline). It does retain carriage returns and skipped lines, however.

Since reviewers read the proposals online, you could use what we know about readability of on-screen text to make your proposal easier to read: Headers that stand out from the text can help readers. (This could mean using all-caps for headers when you cannot use bold.). Shorter paragraphs are easier to read than longer ones. Skipped lines between paragraphs make the text easier to read. Using indents at the start of paragraphs actually makes it **harder** to read on-screen text. And it is more difficult to read more than a few words written in all caps than to read the same text in standard sentence form with caps only at the start of the sentence and for proper names.

So, if you obeyed these rules, you would likely use short all-caps headers to indicate section headings and would use short paragraphs (likely two to four sentences in length). You would

skip lines between paragraphs in your proposal and would not indent paragraphs. You would avoid all-caps in general. You could, of course use the asterisk (*) to indicate an important word that normally would be bolded or italicized in settings where character formatting was available. (This means if we wished to emphasize the word “important” in the previous sentence, we would have written that section of the sentence as, “...to indicate an *important* word that normally...”.) Given what you know about overuse of character highlighting, however, you would use very few such asterisked words in your proposal.

If you know how to use HTML tags, however, you can control the layout of your proposal even more than this. By embedding HTML tags in your proposal, you can put your headings in bold, can control the line spacing, and can use all kinds of character-highlighting techniques and font sizes. If you do not know how to use HTML tags, your proposal is *not* the place to experiment, however. Confirm that your HTML tags are the proper ones before you submit your proposal (possibly through previewing your text as a Web page). If you want a list of HTML tags, there are many sites on the Web that give you lists of tags (see for example, <http://www.tizag.com/htmlT/formattags.php> and <http://werbach.com/barebones/barebones.html>)

Given the new freedom embedded HTML tags give you in terms of formatting, a couple of rules about readability for formatted on-screen text are in order: Bold should be used sparingly because—like extended passages in all-caps—it makes a passage harder to read. Italics are less legible on-screen than regular type. Consistency in size and font enhance readability, while too many font types and sizes reduce readability. For further guidance on fonts, character formatting, and readability, see http://www.metatoggle.com/design_crs/tools.html and Robin Williams’ excellent book, *The Non-designers’ Design Book* (<http://search.barnesandnoble.com/booksearch/isbnInquiry.asp?userid=DV01TukCA4&isbn=0321193857&itm=1> OR http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0321303377/qid=1135181145/sr=1-5/ref=sr_1_5/103-6300758-5008643?s=books&v=glance&n=283155).

Principle 5: Strong proposals have the potential to interest more people.

Okay, we know this one sounds obvious, but recognize that every year proposals get rejected because they are not rated as interesting to enough possible attendees. No matter how interesting a topic may be to *you*, that isn’t the key to whether your proposal gets accepted. Instead, what matters is the extent to which reviewers believe your presentation would appeal to a large enough number of attendees that it should get a program slot over some other proposal that would interest fewer attendees.

What does this mean for you? Well, it means you need to think about how you can make your proposal (and of course, the session it proposes) more appealing to more people. A number of things can make a session more appealing. These include such things as discussion of practical implications (connecting theory to practice, for example), an attempt to address a broader audience (say both higher ed types *and* teachers, as opposed to simply one or the other), and more audience participation (as opposed to a straight lecture presentation with little chance for attendees to interact). Of course, good writing with expressive words and a good title can make a proposal more interesting as well.

Principle 6: A strong proposal is well organized and logical.

While organization isn’t the same as content, a badly organized proposal may leave the reviewer confused or cause the reviewer to miss your point. In a competitive proposal pool, a well-

organized proposal is much more likely to be accepted than a poorly organized proposal, even if the poorly organized one has better content. If the proposal guidelines specify an order for the elements of your proposal (as is the case for the STeP proposals and the Featured Research Papers), follow that order. To assure you don't leave anything out, print out the order and put a checkmark beside each element as you include it. If that order is not obvious, consider including the name of the element as a header if you think the reviewer might miss that you have begun addressing a new element. Simply labeling the element is not enough, however. You need to be sure to talk about that element and not lots of other things. So, if the element is "methodology," talk about the methods you used, not about conceptual issues related to the literature or why what you did was important. Focus is important and an unfocused proposal will feel poorly organized.

If you are given quite a lot of leeway in what order to use, try to choose the organization that seems best matched to the type of presentation you want to make. For example, if you want to present your *research* study, consider an organization like: *Problem/Need for the Study, Methods, Analyses and Findings*, and some combination of *Interpretations, Conclusions, Recommendations, and Future Research*. If you hope to present on a promising *practice* (such as a way to organize online classes, a way to teach history through iMovie, or how service learning projects can enhance preservice teacher preparation –to name just a few), consider something like: *Problems with Current Practice, What the New Practice Offers, Key Issues in Implementing the New Practice*, and *Lessons Learned/Recommendations*. If you hope instead to present a discussion of some *new issue* (such as how military training meets or does not meet the needs of a modern military force, or the role of technology in system change, or important issues in literacy support in libraries today –once again just to name a few), consider an organization like: *The State of X* (with X being the issue), *Why X Is Important, Potential Social/Political/Economic/Philosophical* (pick one or more) *Concerns*, and *Suggested Avenues for Addressing X*.

While these organizations are simply suggestions, what all have in common is that they try to create a logical connection between the elements of the proposal and they should help you focus on a small section of the proposal at a time. If you have understood their intent, you can create your own organizational plan. The key is to focus within each section on the element to be discussed and to order those elements in such a way that a reader (reviewer) can follow the logical sequence of your thinking.

Principle 7: Strong proposals use proper English expression and grammar.

While it is truly remarkable how well most of our international members speak English, it takes only a few English errors to introduce concerns in the mind of a reviewer. In practice, most non-English speakers appear to do better writing English than speaking it. So a reviewer that sees numerous problems in a written proposal may well assume the proposer would have serious problems making an oral presentation in English. If you are not a native speaker of English, consider having a native speaker with good writing skills review your proposal before you submit it. Even if you are a native speaker of English, if you do not express yourself well in writing, get advice and help from someone who does. And don't just do this for your proposal; also do it for your presentation.

Principle 8: Proposals that make a real contribution are more appealing than ones that do not.

When reviewers read proposals, they look for some sign that the proposer has something original to contribute. Few reviewers (and few convention attendees, for that matter) want to see a presentation that contributes little new. Strong proposals tend to demonstrate to the reader that the proposer has new ideas, new and highly applicable findings to share, and/or new recommendations to make. From a reviewer's point of view, this is the payoff for reading the review. That is, when a reviewer finishes reading a review, he or she should think, "It looks like this person has important things to share and likely knows even more than this proposal tells me." Contrasts this with highly predictable replications of previous studies or me-too discussions of issues that have already been discussed extensively in the literature or in previous convention presentations.

Consider this: Let's imagine a reviewer gets four thorough and logically organized proposals, all of which are focused on the same issue. Three feel more like reviews of the literature than new approaches and the fourth one takes a highly creative slant, generating suggested new approaches and offering new ways to think about the issue. Do you think the reviewer will recommend that all four get onto the program? If not, which one do you think he or she will recommend?

So, make sure you contribute something in your proposed presentation. Make sure yours isn't a me-too proposal with little new to offer.

Principle 9: A strong proposal is well-informed.

Clearly it is fine for a proposer to have opinions. AECT values thoughtful members. But strong proposals demonstrate that the proposer is well-read and understands what others have said or written on the proposed topic. Every year reviewers read (and recommend rejection of) proposals that demonstrate the proposer is not well-read, not well-informed, or not up-to-date. AECT seeks to have its conventions be places where the newest and best-informed presenters share the most creative and thoughtful findings, practices, and reflections with the membership and the wider audience of the world. An uninformed proposal does not meet this standard and is unlikely to make it onto the program.

It is, therefore, important that you explore what has been said and written on your topic before you submit your proposal. This may involve a search of the literature. It may involve a search of the Web. It may involve a search of previous convention proceedings. It certainly will involve reflecting on what these searches uncover and using what you find to establish a context for what you propose.

A word of caution, however: A proposal is not a literature review. Reread the previous principle about making a contribution. If your proposal feels like it is simply a graduate paper condensed to a proposal, reviewers are unlikely to recommend it be accepted. Thus, you need to balance the literature with your own contribution. A strong—and accepted—proposal is well-informed **and** makes a real contribution.

Principle 10: Strong proposals make clear what their objectives are.

Sometimes when reviewers finish reading a proposal, they scratch their heads and say, “What exactly is this proposer hoping to accomplish?” You never want your reviewers to have to ask this question. It begins the rapid slide to recommended rejection. Instead, make sure you state somewhere in your proposal exactly what you hope to accomplish in the session.

Given that sessions are for attendees—not for you—we suggest you emphasize what attendees will get out of the session and why it would be valuable to them. Don’t be vague. Avoid phrases like, “Attendees will leave better informed about design practices” or “Attendees will understand the demands of No Child Left Behind.” Instead say something like, “Attending instructional designers will know how to implement seven specific audience analysis techniques that enhance online lesson effectiveness” or “Teacher educators who attend the session will learn five ways professional development school can tie preservice teacher training to increased AYP reports for participating schools.”

The more specific you are about the intent and desired outcome of the session and the better a job you do of convincing the reviewer that your desired outcome matters, the more likely you are to get a favorable reception from reviewers. The better proposals always provide this information and year after year they make it onto the program.

Principle 11: A proposal submitted to the proper division is more likely to be accepted.

Here’s another principle that seems obvious, but a quick review of submissions each year shows that not all submitters understand and abide by it. Each division has a focus. AECT members choose to join that division because of that focus. The focus reflects those members’ interests and the divisional program planner works hard to make the final divisional convention program match that interest. As the program planner builds a panel of divisional reviewers, those reviewers are almost always the members with the highest interest in the focus area of the division.

So, if your proposal does not match the division’s focus, the reviewers are likely to dismiss it as being of little interest to the divisional membership. The divisional program planner may even decide on first read-through that your proposal is not submitted to the proper division and will not send it out for review. Instead, your proposal gets “referred” to another division. While the referral process does not mean your proposal will not be accepted, it does slow the process down and it invites problems. If your proposal goes to the right division, the planner recognizes it as belonging, sends it out to the reviewers, and—if it is a strong proposal—it likely gets a favorable review and makes the program. In contrast, if you submit to the wrong division, the program planner may or may not send it out for review. If it does go out for review, it will likely be rejected with a recommendation that it go to another division. Either way, it is slowed down. Now consider that it may arrive at the division to which it should have been submitted in the first place after most or all of the concurrent slots are gone. If it is a good proposal, it now finds itself likely to get a less desirable time slot, or perhaps can only be accommodated in some delivery format other than what you originally requested.

So, how about the idea of just submitting to *all* divisions (or perhaps multiple divisions as a way of covering your bets)? Well, the national planner also reviews submissions. According to

AECT's submission rules, an identical or largely similar proposal should not be submitted to more than one division. That is, if more than one proposal is submitted, those proposals should differ in easily detectable ways and should represent different presentations. If the national program planner discovers multiple submitted versions of the same proposal, he or she may decide this violates the submission rule and your proposal might not make it to *any* division.

Program planners and reviewers are volunteers. It is important that AECT use their time well. Asking multiple sets of reviewers to review the same (or largely the same) proposal is not a good use of their time.

If you are not a member of the division to which you wish to submit, or if you are uncertain exactly what the division focuses on, use the link from the AECT main page (www.aect.org) to visit the divisional Web site. That page (currently at <http://www.aect.org/Divisions/> as we write) describes the mission and focus of each division. As of right now, here is what that Web page shows:

[Design & Development](#) Promotes the quality and effectiveness of teaching and learning through the acquisition and application of knowledge, skills, and dispositions to design conditions for learning, develop instructional materials and experiences and evaluate the adequacy of instruction and learning.

[Distance Learning](#) Represents members with interests in the full range of distance learning technologies as a means of addressing the educational needs of students, the educational community, and the general public.

[International](#) Encourages practice and research in educational communication for social and economic development across national and cultural lines.

[Management](#) Shares information and provides leadership in the management of resources, people, facilities, processes, and services in the educational media, technology, and information.

[Media & Technology](#) Provides leadership in educational communications and technology by linking professionals holding a common interest in the use of educational technology and its application to the learning process in the K-12 school environment.

[Multimedia Production](#) The Division of Multimedia Production encourages the creative and effective use of multimedia technology to solve instructional problems.

[Research & Theory](#) Promotes the development and advancement of theory; promotes, presents, and disseminates research and scholarship that encompasses multiple perspectives; advocates the study of social and cultural issues in the field; supports, fosters, and mentors emerging scholars.

[Systemic Change](#) Advocates fundamental changes in educational settings to dramatically improve the quality of education and to enable technology to achieve its potential.

[Teacher Education](#) Promotes theory research and practice in support of the development of knowledge, skills, and dispositions of educators who create effective learning environments for diverse learners through the integration of technology.

[Training & Performance](#) Supports human and organizational performance through the development and implementation of learning environments that utilize integrated technology.

You may notice that each division's name above is also a hot link to its Web site. Given how fast the Web changes and the fact that AECT is working to improve its Web site, these links may not be accurate in future (although they are accurate as of this writing). For this reason, if the links above do not function, go to AECT's main Web page (www.aect.org) and access divisional Web sites from there.

The idea, however, is to make sure you understand what a division is interested in and then to combine this with the first principle about matching the annual convention's themes and sub-themes. For Dallas, for example, the first sub-theme is *strengthening connections between theory and practice*. Suppose you wanted to submit a proposal to the Distance Learning Division that addressed this sub-theme. That proposal might talk about how theories of online learning might be applied to enhance teaching and learning for some group. Suppose instead you were submitting a proposal to the Training and Performance Division that addressed sub-theme 2, *strengthening connections between new technologies and educational goals*. That proposal might talk about how newer online collaborative tools might enhance the on-the-job performance of professionals. If you wanted to address sub-theme 3, *strengthening connections among researchers around the globe* and were submitting to the International Division, perhaps you might talk about how technology allows greater worldwide collaboration or how it permits researchers to have their work evaluated in real-time by a global community of researchers. One final example: Imagine you wanted to submit a proposal to the Teacher Education Division that focused on the fourth sub-theme, *strengthening connections between new professionals and more experienced colleagues*. That proposal might talk about how teacher-preparation institutions can collaborate with school districts to create more effective mentoring and induction programs for new teachers.

Clearly the examples above are simply a few of an almost infinite number. For example, one might even combine sub-themes in a single proposal. What we hope these example illustrate, however, is that one tailors the proposal to the theme *and* the division. In order to do such tailoring, you must first know what a division focuses on and you must know what the convention themes and sub-themes are. Accepted proposals do a good job of reflecting both division focus and convention theme.

Principle 12: A proposal that chooses the right delivery format and requests the appropriate amount of time is more likely to be accepted than one that does not.

There are lots of proposal options. You can propose a concurrent session, either as a thirty-minute presentation or a sixty-minute one. You can propose a poster session or a roundtable. You can propose a workshop. Or you can propose a symposium or panel session, perhaps even proposing a session longer than 60 minutes. You can even propose variations within any of these format. For example, you could propose an interactive 60-minute concurrent session in which one or more presenters present for a short time each and then the attendees and presenters move into an interactive discussion. The possibilities for proposals are limited only by what you can conceive.

Unfortunately, however, there are a limited number of presentation slots in the entire convention. This includes roundtables and posters. So, if one proposer gets a 60-minute slot, another proposer may not make the program at all. Similarly, a proposed session of longer than an hour likely bumps other proposers from the program. So program planners (and reviewers) must consider whether a proposal makes the best use of time and space and warrants precedence.

Roundtables and posters should be highly desirable if your intent is to share your work with others in a setting where there is time to answer questions, to discuss implications, and to

compare your findings/contentions/beliefs with those of others. Unlike some professional organizations where one may find oneself in a huge room with dozens and dozens (and dozens) of other roundtables or posters, AECT tries to make roundtable and poster sessions more select, with around 10 roundtables and perhaps as many posters in a one-hour block. We let the room dictate the number. Our goal is to create a fertile environment for exchange. (We have a *fabulous* room in Dallas, by the way, for roundtables and posters. It is probably our nicest room.)

Concurrent sessions tend to favor formal presentations. That is, they often emphasize one-way delivery (even if only initially). This is a type of sharing format in which one hears what the presenter has to say and then a discussant or facilitator may coordinate audience questions.

Workshops usually focus on skills and acquiring the ability to accomplish some task or set of tasks. Workshops generally do not focus on conceptual or philosophical issues, except as those relate to tasks to be accomplished. Recall that workshop attendees pay a \$15 materials charge, so the dynamic of who attends is a bit different.

Symposia (and their near cousin, the panel discussion) tend to involve a group of “experts” or “authorities.” This group normally discusses an identified issue and there may be either a discussant that reacts to what is presented and asks the “experts” follow-up questions or the symposium may be interactive with the audience playing this role.

Let’s consider how delivery format and requested length affect likelihood of being accepted. As noted above, a longer proposal likely bumps someone else. So proposals for longer than 30 minutes need to be *unusually* compelling and appealing to a large number of potential attendees. If not, it is unlikely to be accepted for more than 30 minutes. If the proposer makes clear that he or she will present only if given more than 30 minutes or if the scope of the proposal makes clear that what is proposed cannot be done in 30 minutes, that proposal will likely not be accepted unless it is unusually compelling and appealing. One strategy might be to express in the proposal a desire for more than 30 minutes, but to make clear that you would be willing to take a 30-minute session on the same topic and would reduce the scope accordingly if so accepted. Of course, if what you wish to accomplish cannot be done in 30 minutes, make that clear as well, but recognize that such a decision is risky. In a convention like AECT’s, sessions longer than 60 minutes are extremely rare. Such sessions break up the normal program flow and mean attendees likely will be able to attend at least one fewer session on that day. Thus, requesting a session over 60 minutes means what you propose must be *exceptionally* compelling and should appeal to a *large* number of attendees. If you are proposing a session of longer than 30 minutes—and particularly if you are proposing one longer than 60 minutes—you need to make clear why you believe it is both compelling and widely appealing.

Some proposers seem to think roundtables and posters are of lower status. This is not how we view them. If you want the higher level of interaction and if you can meet your goals without making a formal presentation, choose one of these two formats. You are more likely to be accepted, provided you submit a good proposal and it makes clear you want the highly interactive format of a roundtable or the report-based interchange that posters encourage. A proposal that asks for a roundtable or poster but still talks as if it were a formal presentation

engenders dissonance in reviewers' minds and may be quickly rejected because its delivery format is wrong. By the same token, if you would be willing to adjust your proposed presentation to a roundtable or poster format, please indicate that in your proposal.

Similarly, a concurrent session proposal that really sounds like a highly interactive roundtable or more like the report-based interchange of a poster is likely to be rejected because its delivery format also does not match its apparent objective. And a symposium proposal with only one or two speakers will look to reviewers more like a concurrent session on steroids.

The key in any proposal is to make clear in the proposal *exactly* why the delivery format requested is best suited to the goals of the presentation and the length of time requested. As noted above, if you have some flexibility in what you are willing to accept in terms of either time or format, make that clear in the proposal.

Remember that the program planners are responsible for building the strongest international convention program they can. That requires a rich blend of presentation types. It mixes and matches in a way that makes the convention an intellectually and socially stimulating experience that flows smoothly across days. That means the program cannot be made up of only one type of session, nor can one delivery paradigm dominate completely. Variety and interest must prevail.

[Principle 13: Deadlines matter.](#)

Submitting your proposal on time is important. If you submit it late, it may never reach the reviewer to be accepted or rejected. Don't treat submission deadlines as if they were suggestions. This way lies rejection.

Final Comments

Clearly we do not wish to impair your creativity, nor restrict your freedom. Our goal is to build a strong convention program. A strong convention program supports and enhances the strength of the organization. But we recognize that a strong program begins with strong proposals. We hope this guide helps you produce the strongest proposal you can and that you make it onto the convention program. Please respect the volunteer reviewers' and planners' time. The more closely you follow these guidelines and clearly aid the reviewers in understanding your proposal, the better your chances for acceptance.