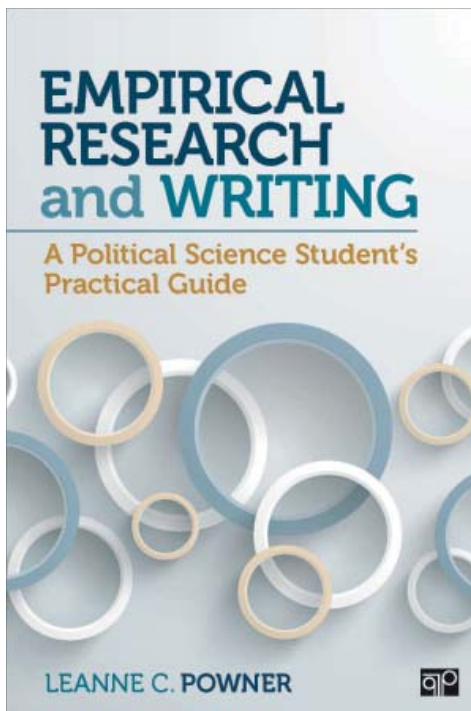


Getting In: A Primer for Writing a Successful Conference Proposal

By Leanne Powner

Students increasingly have opportunities to present their research at departmental, school, and national conferences. Most presentations and posters start as proposals, which conference organizers then review. Applications often outnumber available slots, so organizers must be selective in which papers they accept.



Leanne Powner is a former professor and academic advisor turned military wife. After teaching research methods at the BA, MA, and PhD level, she wrote *Empirical Research and Writing: A Student's Practical Guide* (CQ Press, 2014) to share her insights and experience with other students. This article draws from material in Chapter 11, Posters, Presentations and Publishing. She, her husband, and their beagles live in southeastern Virginia – at least for now.

The paper proposal therefore plays an incredibly important role in being offered one of those scarce slots. For most political science conferences, including the Pi Sigma Alpha conference, the proposal takes the form of the paper abstract. An abstract is a paragraph-length summary of the (proposed or completed) research. It provides organizers with enough information to determine whether they want to accept it and if so, what other kinds of papers would fit with it to form a panel or poster grouping.

The typical abstract has six sentences. The typical empirical research paper has six sections. This is unlikely to be coincidental. Successful abstracts summarize the paper by summarizing each of the sections. I like to think about and write my abstracts by responding to the following questions, usually in a sentence each. If you can answer these, you've thought through the paper well enough to be able to execute it, and conference organizers want to make sure slots go to researchers who are most likely to complete the proposed project rather than to people who will drop out at the last minute because their papers aren't done.

1. What's the research question? What gap or puzzle does this paper respond to?

2. What's the scholarly context? What do we know about this topic, and how does my research fit into that? What have we said – or not said – that contextualizes this research?

3. What's my alternative argument? How do I differ from, expand upon, or correct claims in the literature?

4. How will I test this claim? What's my empirical verification strategy? How will I determine if my alternative argument is right?

5. What did/will I find? What's the summary of my (real or anticipated) findings?

6. So what? What's the importance of my findings, either substantive policy-oriented or in relationship to the scholarly literature? What do we know now that we didn't know before?

The Abstract Worksheet walks you through writing an abstract by giving you prompts and space to write. If your handwritten response doesn't fit into the space provided, you're giving too much information.

This formula works for subjects other than political science, too. Scholars in sociology, communications, and linguistics have also had great success using it to write abstracts and apply to conferences. Good luck, and happy writing!



Abstract Writing Worksheet

Use this sheet to draft an abstract for your paper. If you can't handwrite your response to each prompt in the box, you're providing too much information.

Prompt	Your Response
Your research question	
The scholarly context	
Your alternative argument	
Your testing method	
Summary of [anticipated] results	
Importance/relationship to existing knowledge (tentative/limited)	

