Alvin Sherman Library Academic Workshop Series
CRAFTING ENGAGING CONFERENCE PROPOSALS

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To get chosen by conference organizers, a presentation proposal must be thorough and succinct, informative and inviting.
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You need to distill your ideas into an engaging narrative that is clearly compelling and compellingly clear.
Start by studying presentation abstracts from the previous year(s) of the conference to which you are submitting. Know the culture! What do the abstracts sound like? How formal? How long?
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Read the submission guidelines from the conference and follow them precisely.
Brainstorm possible topics. Set an extreme time limit (3 minutes? 5? 50?) and write stuff down in a frenzy. Don’t stop to evaluate quality, sense, clarity, or logic. Don’t stop to think or breathe or eat or get up or check email or anything.
Don’t sweat making mistakes in spelling, grammar, logic, or whatever: Your goal is to give nascent ideas a chance to form, so don’t interfere with whatever is flowing out of you. Think with your fingers moving on the keyboard.
Discover what you think, what you care about, what you want to share, what you feel confident enough to talk about, what you're willing to offer. Once you have a feel for that, you can start writing.
Later you’ll move on to refining, illustrating, elaborating, developing. But now, take a break and repeat. And repeat. Keep repeating until you have a surplus of ideas, none of which has to be "right" or "doable."
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Just as chefs sometimes combine oddly different ingredients to create unexpected delicacies, you might consider combining two or more seemingly unrelated topics.
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With a bunch of ideas now loosely formulated, pick what grabs you. Highlight it, play with it, elaborate it, and refine it enough to pitch it to colleagues who are interested, discerning, and willing to offer constructive and direct feedback.
Listen carefully to what they say and decide whether to take it seriously. Be willing to throw out an idea despite their enthusiasm; be willing to cling to an idea, despite their dismissals.
Revise, fiddle, and then settle on a topic that is doable and interesting.
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Now, look for, and in point form jot down, three (or four or five or maybe only two) points you will make, areas you will cover, ideas you will offer, techniques you will elucidate.
Okay, time to start writing the actual proposal. Establish in one or two sentences the context for your talk: Something about the field, something about the history of your topic, something about what is lacking in the field, etc.
The context has to be bigger than your topic but not too much bigger. You are establishing the boundaries of your sandbox, the boards of your skating rink. You can do this in a social-science sort of way ("Research shows that . . ."),
or you can do it by saying something compelling and provocative:

Cops don’t cry. If they want to uphold the law, project a confident public identity, and avoid being targeted as a weak link, they must maintain a persona of invulnerability. So how then could they possibly risk asking someone like a therapist for help?
Or something like this:

When an aging mother, slipping into dementia, forgets the name of her daughter, the daughter loses an essential part of her own identity. If her mother doesn’t know her, who does she become?
Now compose the third sentence. Draw on the 3 (or 2 or 4 or 5) points you made earlier to help you define the boundaries of what your presentation will cover:

This workshop will help family therapists apply their interpersonal expertise to the intrapersonal experience of their clients.
Or:

This workshop will provide specific, practical suggestions for therapists who are helping Alzheimer’s families grieve their losses, find themselves, and discover what their loved one can still engage in and enjoy.
Or:

This workshop will bring theory into action, helping therapists use their systemic understanding to establish effective techniques for intervention.
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Devote the 4th and 5th sentences to elaborating on the point you make in Sentence 3. What are you going to do? What can participants anticipate? What will they learn? How will you deliver the ideas, techniques, and/or skills they want to know?
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With a draft etched out, read it aloud and start revising: Does it make sense? Does it flow? Will it engage your audience?
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Keep revising until the proposal flows, makes sense, and adheres to stipulated word limits.
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Before sending your proposal to the conference organizers, send it out to your peers. Ask people whom you trust will be informed, discerning, and honest. Ask them to assess whether the proposal makes sense and captivates their attention.