

## How to Get Your Proposal Accepted at SHOT

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In recent years, the SHOT Program Committee has received an exceptional number of high quality abstract submissions. From these we always must reject a great many, a difficult task. Nevertheless, we felt compelled to write this brief note with an eye to making that job even harder. Thinking particularly of graduate students, we offer these guidelines for proposal abstracts because we have seen that students from some programs consistently submit excellent, professional abstracts, while others do not. We sincerely doubt that this divergence always reflects the abilities of the scholars in question or the quality of their scholarship. Instead, it appears that a minority of graduate programs impart a clear sense of the elements of winning abstracts, while students at other programs are taught these skills haphazardly, if at all. To broaden access to SHOT, we outline here leading attributes which lend that professional authority to top-quality abstracts.

Each successful abstract usually consists of three parts. The first is the statement of the topic at issue. The opening sentences must capture the interest of any casual reader who, and this is the most important thing, is not inherently consumed by the topic in question. In short, the abstract must not only anticipate the question “What?” but also “So What!?” Should this go unanswered, the would-be panelist or organizer is almost assured a speedy rejection by a grumpy and overworked Program Committee. Scanning through an abstract in an unsuccessful attempt to figure out what a paper or panel is about is enough to try even the most patient and generous among us, especially when facing the task of rejecting far more abstracts than we can accept. Yet it must be said that this most crucial part of every abstract is usually found where it belongs—that is, in the first few sentences.

On the other hand, the second desirable part is missing a good portion of the time. The abstract must make a sound argument for why the topic in question is interesting, relevant, and important to the intellectual community of SHOT. Some authors attempt to do this by stating that “topic X has never been studied before.” Whether true or not, we rarely count this as a sufficient reason to accept an abstract, for the question inevitably arises: “Did generations of scholars correctly dismiss “topic X” as mundane and thus unworthy of attention?” Unfortunately many abstracts fail to counter this question in any way. Apparently these authors assume that unexplored territory will, by definition and without elaboration, merit the attention and interest of SHOT’s membership. Sadly this is almost never the case.

It is exactly here that a more methodical approach to the preparation of abstracts quickly sets those that pique our unanimous interest apart from those that make us itch for the next abstract in the pile. The easiest remedy is to outline a straightforward contribution the exploration of “topic X” will make to some known historiographic literature or theoretical tradition. Few abstracts ever make the slightest attempt to do this, but it is not difficult. The proposal need only mention a few important authors, central articles, or leading texts which are read in common by a significant segment of our society, briefly state the substance of the debate defined by these works, and, lastly, sketch how this proposal contributes to it (i.e. does it advance or critique it?). The best proposals usually accomplish this in no more than a paragraph.

From time to time we receive complaints after rejection notices go out. Now and then the Program Chair must answer huffy letters in high dudgeon accusing the committee’s members of possessing no knowledge of this or that topic, of discriminating against this or that national group, and the like. The Program Committee goes to great lengths to ensure that the program represents different historical time periods (medieval, early modern, modern, etc.), topics (gender, economic history, labor history, etc.), and nationalities (U.S., Canadian, European, etc.). But, true enough, as a committee of three individuals we can never hope to master all

possible topics or all possible languages in which the members of SHOT choose to work. It is also true that we sometimes reject perfectly good abstracts that propose topics outside the bounds of SHOT (to cite a recent example, an internal history of mathematical ideas). In some few cases, we believe that individual papers might even make excellent contributions to a different conference, just not SHOT. But such cases are, in fact, very rare, usually no more than one or two abstracts each year. In no case in recent memory have such rejections ever sparked a heated letter of complaint. The vast majority of rejections occur because the authors have made no argument at all for the potential relevance of their proposals to SHOT's membership.

In fact the committee is predisposed to accept any abstract that advances a plausible case for its relevance to known works in the history of technology; likewise we always accept those that advance a case for the relevance of the history of technology to any other known literature. We even do so whether or not we necessarily know the merits of the particular books and articles in question. If we were to receive an abstract from a Byelorussian or a native of the Chatham Islands claiming to contribute to a debate among his or her compatriots about the history of technology, we would jump at the chance to include it, if for no other reason than to redress the ignorance among SHOT members about such underexplored subjects.

One last piece of every "perfect" abstract also bears mention. The very best abstracts, those that always garner our unanimous acceptance, not only state their topic clearly in the first few sentences, not only pass from there into a paragraph about the relevance of this topic to known interests within SHOT, they also end by stating what methods and what body of research the author has used to tackle the topic in question. Sometimes abstracts go so far as to intimate the author's conclusions, but it usually suffices to know that the author is onto something interesting and relevant and has thought seriously about how to go about his or her task. This last bit is usually covered in two or three sentences.

As matters stand, we have a notable rejection rate for paper and panel submissions—fine evidence of a healthy society engaged in substantive inquiry and debate over issues that matter. These guidelines will have little effect on the overall rejection rate, a proportion arising from the quantity of submissions against the basic time and space constraints of a meeting. Rather, in offering these guidelines we aim to uncloak the mysteries that apparently have left many in the dark. All any graduate student need do is start off with a “hook,” stating his or her topic in no more than a paragraph; then develop an additional paragraph that outlines the historiographic relevance to SHOT; and, last, close with a brief statement of what he or she is going to do about it and how. Should students and scholars that make up SHOT all begin to do this, the work will become significantly harder for the Program Committee, but the payoffs for panelists, audiences, and SHOT at large will certainly reward that effort.