Preparing a Successful NASP Convention Presentation Proposal

By Kathleen Minke & Susan Ratterree

All proposals considered for NASP convention presentations undergo a masked review process. Each year, some proposals that appear to have merit are not accepted for presentation because these proposals either violated a submission rule or did not provide sufficiently clear information to result in a positive decision.

There is no magic to writing a successful convention proposal but there are simple best practices for doing so. These are outlined below and can be help authors at all levels—students, graduate educators, researchers, and practitioners—to prepare a successful proposal.

Please note that the process described below applies to proposals for papers, practitioner conversation sessions, posters, mini-skills, and symposia. The half- and full-day NASP Convention Workshops (i.e., sessions that require an extra fee beyond convention registration) are primarily invited presentations, and the presenters for these workshops are selected via a separate process. Questions regarding the workshops should be directed to Mark Swerdlik at meswerd@ilstu.edu.

The Review Process

Proposals must be submitted online through the NASP website at http://www.nasponline.org/conventions/index.aspx. The submission deadline is June 14, 2017. Over the summer, volunteers, who are NASP members representing practitioners and trainers, review the proposal summaries. If you are interested in serving in this capacity, watch the NASP communities and webpage, as reviewers will be recruited in May and June.

Reviewers see only the summaries and learning objectives that are submitted. They do not read abstracts and they do not know who wrote the proposals. Reviewers rate the summaries on three dimensions: (a) evidence base and methodology, (b) organization and clarity of content, and (c) quality and clarity of proposed learning objectives for participants. Each dimension is rated on a 1–5 scale.

Each summary is read by three different reviewers. Scores are summed across reviewers and an individual proposal can have a score ranging from 9 to 45. The cut-off scores for each proposal type (i.e., paper, practitioner conversation, poster, symposium, mini-skills) are set based on the amount of space available for each session type. The amount of space differs from year to year, according to the venue. Typically, however, there is most space for poster sessions, followed by paper sessions. Mini-skills sessions, symposia, and practitioner conversation sessions tend to have fewer slots available.

Preparing the Summary

The summary is the single most critical element of the proposal. Successful proposals have summaries that make it easy for the reviewers to understand exactly what will be presented and how the content is relevant to the field. Be sure to consider each dimension of the proposal scoring calculation. Do not include your name or any identifying information in your summary or in the name of your summary file, or your proposal will be automatically disqualified. Because we use a masked review process, if authors identify themselves in any way, the proposal is disqualified.
Evidence base and methodology. This first dimension creates some difficulty at times. Typically, too little information is provided. That is, some authors spend most of their 800-word limit giving general background on their topic and fail to provide any degree of detail about the core content of the session.

If you are presenting a specific research study, be sure to give information on your methodology. Reviewers want to feel confident that you followed appropriate procedures in designing the study and analyzing the data. Results should be explained briefly, and implications for further research and practice should be included. If you have not completed your analyses at the time you submit the proposal, this is acceptable (provided you will have them completed by the time of the convention).

However, you still should identify how you plan to analyze the data and what your expected outcomes will be. Please take into account the time it takes to collect and analyze data when preparing to submit your proposal. Some presenters have cancelled at the last minute when they determined their research study was not sufficiently completed before they were to present. Only submit a proposal if you are confident that your study will be complete by the time of the convention.

If your proposal does not involve a particular research study, as will be true for most mini-skills and practitioner conversation sessions, reviewers will be looking for evidence that what you plan to present is drawn from a sound theoretical or research base. For example, if you plan to present information on best practices in a particular area, the reviewers should be able to tell how you selected practices for inclusion. Proposals that describe an untested “good idea” are typically rated fairly low on this dimension. For example, if you developed and implemented a counseling group in a school, you need to provide some evidence that the group sessions were based on sound practices and that you evaluated the outcomes. It is not expected that you will have a lot of formal data, but you need to provide evidence that you have systematically evaluated what you have done in some way. Simply describing the technique is unlikely to be viewed as sufficient.

Planning to Present Research? Consider your timing. Be sure you can complete the research and write up the findings in time to develop your presentation. We have seen an increase in the number of presentations cancelled at the last minute because the timing did not work out. We know life happens so being planful and realistic is good for everyone involved.

Organization and clarity. Summaries should be very carefully reviewed for spelling, grammar, and usage errors. Sometimes it appears as if authors wrote the proposal quickly and did not edit their work. Carelessness in the preparation of the proposal makes reviewers wonder if similar carelessness will be reflected in the actual presentation, resulting in lower scores. Remember that reviewers are reading many proposals (usually around 30), so they appreciate prose that gets to the point quickly and does not require a lot of deciphering. Short, declarative, active-voice sentences are likely to fit the bill. It helps to begin with a brief, introductory paragraph that introduces your topic and gives a quick overview of a few key issues. This paragraph should make the reader interested in what is about to follow. In subsequent paragraphs, outline in as much detail as possible (staying within the 800-word limit) what you plan to present.

Quality of learning objectives for session participants. While the learning objectives are not included in the body of the summary, they are required component of submission that is considered by reviewers along with the summary. This third dimension, the quality of learning objectives, is newest to the rating
system. Authors are instructed to provide 3-5 learning objectives in the appropriate fields. These will be shared with the reviewers. The intention is to allow reviewers to evaluate what a participant will gain by attending the proposed session. The learning objectives should clearly outline specific anticipated benefits to participants, including skills or knowledge they would acquire. In other words, you want to communicate clearly why attendees will want to be at your presentation and how it will enhance their practice. Sometimes, presenters do not draw a clear connection between the learning objectives and the summary document itself. Reviewers tend to rate such submissions low. See “Tips for Writing Effective Learning Objectives” for further guidance on this part of the proposal.

The three areas above are the most important to address because they are directly assessed by the review criteria. A brief discussion of limitations also is generally helpful. Readers tend to respond negatively to proposals that appear to be “commercials” for a particular product or method. While authors are expected to be enthusiastic about their work, readers are well aware that there are no perfect studies or techniques. Acknowledgment of how this particular proposal fits within the larger literature on the topic suggests that the authors will provide an appropriately balanced presentation.

Avoid Errors in Submission

Before submitting the summary online, check it carefully to make sure it conforms to the 800-word limit (exclusive of the title and supporting documentation—e.g., tables, figures, and references—but inclusive of appendices.) Any proposal that goes over this word limit will automatically be disqualified. Also, once again, be sure that the summary does not include information that identifies the author. Sometimes this can be challenging, especially if the proposal relates to a larger body of your own work. It can help to refer to other work without first person references (e.g., say “Prior research indicated…” rather than, “My prior research indicated…”). Make sure the document you are about to upload does not include a title page with author identification. Do not use a running head that includes your name. Do not inadvertently identify yourself in naming the file you upload. Be sure to include your learning objectives in the appropriate section of the submission form. Proposals violating these rules are all disqualified.

Match Content and Type of Session

Think about the kind of proposal you are submitting. Symposia, especially, require some sort of explanation of how the various presentations fit together into a coherent whole. If you are submitting a poster session proposal, the information you plan to present should lend itself to a visual presentation. There have been times when the proposal was for a poster, but the authors indicated they planned to include music, roleplays, or other methods inconsistent with a poster format.

Please indicate one Skill Level which best describes your proposal:

- **Introductory**: Aimed at participants with basic preparation in the topic area.
- **Intermediate**: Aimed at participants with basic preparation and some advanced study or experience in the topic area.
- **Advanced**: Aimed at participants with significant experience or expertise in the topic area.

We are especially interested in advanced presentations. Most of the attendees at the convention are experienced school psychologists, so you can anticipate at least entry-level knowledge of your topic.
Finally, remember that your summary will be distributed to reviewers electronically. So, if you used “track changes” or other features of your word processor, accept all changes and make sure the version you submit does not have hidden comments (these sometimes pop up for the reviewers and can cause disqualifications).

**Session Descriptions**

In addition to the items described above, you will be asked to provide a 30 or less word description of your session that will appear online and in the Final Program. This is not considered as part of the proposal review process but it can be an important tool for getting people to attend your session. See “Tips for Writing Attention Grabbing Session Descriptions” for guidance on how you can draft a clean, compelling description.

**Follow Up on Your Submission**

Although the online system works more and more smoothly each year, there is always the possibility of electronic and human error when so many proposals are being processed. So, it pays to keep track of your proposal. Be sure to submit your proposal by the posted deadline. Even better, be an early bird. If you submit a few weeks or even days before the deadline, it will be much easier to sort out any technical difficulties. Note that staff will not actually be at the office at midnight on the night the presentation proposal system closes!

After you submit your proposal, you will receive an automatic e-mail confirmation. To ensure that you receive this e-mail, you must add the following address to your address book or safe sender contacts list: conventions@naspweb.org. Otherwise, all messages about your proposal could end up in your spam or junk folders. Save this e-mail; it will be very helpful later, especially if there are any problems. The confirmation e-mail should say that your proposal and the summary attachment were received. If it indicates that the summary attachment was not received, please e-mail Marcia Harvey (mharvey@naspweb.org) as soon as possible.

Proposals will be reviewed in July. Information about how to view the list of accepted proposals on the NASP website is sent in early October to all primary presenters who submitted a proposal. If you do not receive such an e-mail communication, please send a message to Marcia Harvey (mharvey@naspweb.org) or the current program coordinator for assistance. Please note that primary presenters are responsible for communicating all information to applicable secondary presenters. NASP does not communicate directly with secondary presenters or contributors.

Also, if your name or that of any of the secondary presenters’ changes after the submission of your proposal, be very sure to either register for the convention under the original name or notify the NASP Convention Department of the name change on the submission. If you submit your proposal using one name and register under a different name (e.g., using a maiden name as part of your last name one time but not the other, or using a formal first name one time and a nickname the other), the NASP system will not recognize you as the same person and will assume that you are not registered for the convention. If you are the primary presenter, your presentation will be cancelled. Unregistered secondary presenters will be listed as contributors.
As a final note, if your proposal is not accepted, it is fine to ask for feedback to help you prepare a more successful proposal in the future. If you think an error has been made, be sure to ask about it. If you have a suggestion on how to improve the proposal submission process, please make it. However, please remember to use good manners. Unfortunately, over the years, program cochairs have received a number of e-mails and phone calls that would be considered less than professional. So, if you're really angry or irritated, wait a couple of days before hitting that send button or leaving that voicemail. Your colleagues on the Convention Committee will be most grateful.

Now, start writing your proposal. Good luck!

This article is an updated version of one written by Kathleen Minke and Susan Ratteree published in *Communiqué*, Vol. 38(8), June 2010.

**Submissions for 2018: Wanted: Skill-Building, Practitioner- Oriented Presentations**

*By Kathleen Minke*

NASP’s goal at the annual convention is to provide the highest quality, most relevant sessions on a diverse range of topics. This includes presentations on the latest research as well as evidence-based programs and interventions. We are making a concerted effort this year to increase the number of presentations that equip practitioners across the spectrum, from early career to seasoned, with evidence-based skills, strategies, and knowledge they can use.

In particular, we want to encourage practitioners who might not normally think to submit a proposal to do so. You may not be doing theoretical research, but you probably are doing effective skills-based practice that other practitioners would find useful. Ask yourself, “Am I doing something that really works? Is it grounded in research? Do I have the evidence to demonstrate outcomes? Would other school psychologists benefit from knowing how to do it?” These are questions that most effective practitioners live by in their daily work. You may simply need to ask yourself the next question: “Can I translate this knowledge into a presentation for other practitioners?” You might also ask yourself: “Have I done presentations on this as an inservice that could be adapted?” or “Could I use a presentation I develop for the convention to help train other staff or advocate an issue with administrators in my district?”

Typically, advanced skills-based sessions are mini-skills (80 minutes), but a targeted strategy or focus can be covered in a paper presentation (50 minutes). A symposium might be appropriate, for example, if you are talking about a team-based process and panelists represent perspectives of different team members. Additionally, our newest session type, Practitioner Conversations, is designed to promote sharing of the real-world experiences of school psychologists who are implementing evidence-based practices that will be meaningful for other seasoned practitioners. Presenters outline their topic for 15–20 minutes and then lead a structured discussion of participants’ experiences with the topic. To facilitate meaningful conversation, these sessions are placed in relatively small rooms with a limit of 30 participants. Unlike the other session types, which focus primarily on providing information to attendees, these sessions focus on promoting an exchange of ideas among all participants. That is, the
presenters serve primarily as facilitators of discussion among attendees. These sessions are especially appropriate for topics related to one of NASP’s interest group areas.

NASP offers a number of resources and tips to help you prepare a proposal that will allow you to share your knowledge with colleagues and to develop an effective presentation. See the related article in this issue of *Communiqué* regarding writing an effective proposal and check online for additional resources in the coming weeks at [http://www.nasponline.org/conventions](http://www.nasponline.org/conventions).

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**Join Us in Chicago as a Presenter**

The proposal submission system for the NASP 2018 Convention in Chicago is open May 1-June 14, 2017. Don’t wait until the last minute to submit your presentation proposal. Presenting is a great way to share your knowledge, connect with colleagues, and be an integral part of the convention experience. The following articles provide useful tips for writing a successful proposal. Get more information and submit your proposal at: [http://www.nasponline.org/cfpp](http://www.nasponline.org/cfpp).

**Tips for Writing Attention Grabbing Session Descriptions**

The primary goal in giving a presentation at the NASP convention is to share a particular aspect of your knowledge with fellow school psychologists. This requires that people show up at the presentation. There are typically more than 1,000 presentations and workshops at a NASP convention. The competition for attention is pretty high.

How you write your session title and description can be the difference between grabbing people’s attention and not. This is true both the online abstract (75 words) and the session description for the printed program (30-50 words). Following are a few tips.

- Appeal to the WIIFM (What’s In It for Me) mindset. Time is precious to school psychologists. Highlight how the presentation will help them do their job better.
- Make the learning objectives useful. See “Tips for Writing Effective Learning Objectives.”
- Be a problem solver. Most convention sessions address a problem or challenge and what works to address it. Use your description to help readers connect to the problem (That sounds familiar!) and want the solution (Sounds interesting; I should check it out).
- Set accurate expectations. Make sure the description actually describes what the session will really cover. If you are only covering the research identifying a problem, don’t promise in the description to discuss effective approaches to addressing it (despite what it says above).
• Appeal to people’s purpose. Improving outcomes for kids is the point of our work. Don’t talk around this but rather point right to it, even if the focus of the presentation is on affecting the context (e.g., school climate) and people (e.g., teachers) within it who are affecting the kids.

• Ditch the filler words and phrases. You can skip phrases like, “In this presentation, presenters will....” Get right to the meat of the session content.

• Do not repeat yourself. Often presenters simply rewrite the same idea a few different ways without imparting new information. Writing the same idea in a different form doesn’t provide people with more helpful information. It won’t make your session sound more compelling and only wastes space.

• Get active. Use active tense. “Strategies to improve student behavior will be examined.” NO. “Learn strategies to improve student behavior.” YES.

• Spend some time on the title. This is your lead—the idea that will grab people’s attention from the get-go and maybe the only thing people read. Think about what matters to your potential attendees, not just the topic itself. The title should convey relevance, usefulness, and specificity.

EXAMPLES OF SESSION TITLE AND DESCRIPTION “EVOLUTION”

1. Classic Description (too long and, well, um, Zzzzzzzzzzzzz)
   What the Research Says About Fidelity in Teacher-Delivered Brief Interventions
   In order to explore factors related to successful implementation of brief academic interventions, a study was conducted to examine the trends and reactions of general education teachers toward adapting instruction and providing individualized strategies for students and their perceptions of success. The study is unique in that it assessed the attitude of teachers regarding brief interventions for students across a variety of academic needs, how they approached providing those interventions, and how successful the interventions were. The study also looked at how teacher perceptions either facilitated or impeded effective intervention delivery and what factors might lower barriers to teacher engagement in the process. The presentation will report the results of the study as well as discuss implications for school psychologists who desire to improve their use of brief interventions by teachers in their schools.

2. Better (a little punchier and just under 50 words)
   A Research-Based Approach to Improving Teachers’ Delivery of Brief Interventions
   This workshop will address the major issues that interfere with teachers’ ability to deliver brief academic interventions and monitor progress with efficacy. Presenters will review the research and describe strategies for helping teachers deliver individualized instruction more effectively. Presentation and discussion methods will be used.

3. On Point (brief 30 words, value focused, and action/outcomes oriented)
   Getting It Done Right: Making Brief Interventions Work for Teachers
   Helping teachers more effectively deliver and adapt brief academic interventions is critical to improving student outcomes. Learn common barriers and how to share simple strategies that busy teachers can successfully employ.

Tips for Writing Effective Learning Objectives
A learning objective should include a measurable verb (e.g., describe, design, assess, apply, explain, analyze) and focus on the learner. For example: “This session will help participants present and advocate the use of the NASP Practice Model to their local board of education.”

A good rule to follow is starting all of your learning objectives with a stem statement such as: “This session will help participants ________.” Learning objectives should be no longer than 20 words, not including the stem statement. One- to two-hour sessions should have three learning objectives. Activities that last 3 or more hours should identify three to five objectives.

We encourage presenters to consider including a specific objective that links the content to the NASP Practice Model, such as: “This session will help participants describe how __________ fits into a comprehensive role as outlined by the NASP Practice Model.”

The following are common errors made in writing learning objectives:

- Simply listing topics that will be covered
- Using nonmeasurable verbs (e.g., understand, gain awareness)
- Not focusing on the learner (e.g., the presenter will provide...)