**How-To(sday): How to Write a Paper or Conference Proposal Abstract**

Posted on July 12, 2011 by Karen

*JE: Some useful information here, but the examples are much too difficult, I think!*

(Tuesday Post Category: Strategizing Your Success in Academia)

Tuesdays I will occasionally feature “How-To(sday)” posts, short guides to certain genres of academic writing. I’m happy to take requests for these. Just email me at gettenure@gmail.com.

Today we look at the **paper/conference proposal abstract**. This is a critical genre of writing for scholars in the humanities and social sciences. Usually between 200 and 500 words long, it is a short abstract that describes research/a talk/a journal article that you are GOING to write. This is in contrast to the abstract of the research/dissertation/article that you have already written.

Mastering the paper abstract is one of the most important skills you can acquire while still a graduate student. Learn the tricks of the paper abstract and you have the ticket in hand to a steady ride of conference and publishing opportunities. These are the conferences and publications that a few years down the line, set your c.v. apart from your peers, and land you that job.

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The paper abstract is highly formulaic. Let’s break it down. It needs to show the following:

1) big picture problem or topic widely debated in your field.

2) gap in the literature on this topic.

3) your project filling the gap.

4) the specific material that you examine in the paper.

5) your original argument.

6) a strong concluding sentence.

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Each of these six elements is mostly likely contained in a single sentence.

Sentence 1: Big picture topic that is being intensively debated in your field/fields, possibly with reference to scholars (“The question of \_\_\_\_\_ has been widely debated in \_\_\_\_\_ field, with scholars such as \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ arguing \_\_\_\_\_”).

Sentence 2: Gap in the literature on this topic. This is the key sentence of the abstract. (“However, these works/articles/arguments/perspectives have not adequately addressed the issue of \_\_\_\_\_.”).

Sentence 3: Your project fills this gap (“My paper addresses the issue of \_\_\_\_\_ with special attention to \_\_\_\_\_”).

Sentence 4+ (*length here depends on your total word allowance, and more sentences may be possible*): The specific material that you are examining—your data, your texts, etc. ( “Specifically, in my project, I will be looking at \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_, in order to show \_\_\_\_\_. I will discuss \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_, and compare them with \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ in order to reveal the previously misunderstood connections between \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.”)

Sentence 5: Your main argument and contribution, concisely and clearly stated. (“I argue that…”)

Sentence 6: Strong Conclusion! (“In conclusion, this project, by closely examining \_\_\_\_\_, sheds new light on the little recognized issue of \_\_\_\_\_. “).

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Start by writing out your own version of the sentences above, succinctly if you can, but without stressing about your word limit too much.

Once that is done, edit to your word count.

One of the key points of the paper abstract is that it is very short, and every word must count. No fluff, no filler, no blather.

Remove wordy phrases like, “it can be argued that,” “Is is commonly acknowledged that,” “I wish to propose the argument that”—these are all empty filler. Work in short, declarative sentences.

If you are wondering—how do I make an argument when I haven’t written the paper yet? That, of course, is the challenge. Come up with a plausible, reasonable argument for the purposes of the abstract. If you end up writing something different in the actual paper itself, that’s ok!

Make sure that your final product shows your:

1) big picture

2) gap in the literature

3) your project filling the gap

4) the specific material that you examine in the paper.

5) your argument.

6) A strong conclusion.

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For your reference, here are two abstracts that demonstrate how the principles above work. Each has parts missing, as noted. Inclusion would have strengthened the abstract:

1. Access to marriage or marriage-like institutions, and the recognition of lesbian and gay familial lives more generally, has become central to lesbian and gay equality struggles in recent years [**Sentence 1–Big problem**]. [**Sentence 2–Gap in literature MISSING here**]. This paper considers what utopian fiction has to offer by way of alternatives to this drive for ever more regulation of the family [**Sentence 3–Her project fills the gap**]. Through analysis of Marge Piercy’s classic feminist novel, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, and Thomas Bezucha’s award-winning gay film, Big Eden, alternative ways of conceptualizing the place of law in lesbian and gay familial lives are considered and explored [**Sentence 4–Her specific material in the paper**]. Looking to utopia as a method for rethinking the place of law in society offers rich new perspectives on the issue of lesbian and gay familial recognition [**Sentence 5–Her argument, weak**]. I argue that utopian fiction signals that the time is now ripe for a radical reevaluation of how we recognize and regulate not only same-sex relationships but all family forms [**Sentence 6– a strong conclusion.**].

[Imagining a Different World: Reconsidering the Regulation of Family Lives. Rosie Harding. Law and Literature. Vol. 22, No. 3 (Fall 2010) (pp. 440-462)]

2. History, it seems, has to attain a degree of scientificity, resident in the truth-value of its narrative, before it can be called history, as distinguished from the purely literary or political [**Sentence 1–Big problem**]. Invoking the work of Jacques Rancière and Hayden White, this essay investigates the manner in which history becomes a science through a detour that gives speech a regime of truth [**Sentence 2–Literature, no gap mentioned**]. It does this by exploring the nineteenth-century relationship of history to poetry and to truth in the context of the emerging discipline of history in Bengal [**Sentence 3–Her project fills the gap**]. The question is discussed in relation to a patriotic poem, Palashir Yuddha (1875), accused of ahistoricality, as well as to a defense made by Bengal’s first professional historian, Jadunath Sarkar, against a similar charge in the context of Bankimchandra Chatterjee’s historical novels [**Sentence 4–Her specific material in the paper**]. That the relationship of creativity to history is a continuing preoccupation for the historian is finally explored through Ranajit Guha’s invocation of Tagore in “History at the Limit of World-History” (2002) [Sentence 5–Her argument, weakly stated]. [**MISSING Sentence 6—a strong conclusion**].

[History in Poetry: Nabinchandra Sen’s “Palashir Yuddha” and the Question of Truth. Rosinka Chaudhuri. The Journal of Asian Studies. Vol. 66, No. 4 (Nov., 2007) (pp. 897-918)]

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