

Answering the Call

Best Practices for Writing Speaking Proposals

by Annette Burke Lyttle, CG

Opportunities abound for genealogical speakers to present at conferences and for webinar series, but responding to calls for proposals is an art we must master if we want our presentations to be accepted. Having an opportunity to speak on a national or regional stage builds our reputations as professionals and allows us to reach a wide audience. The gate between us and that audience is the call for proposals.

What's in a Call for Proposals?

Program committees for international, national, regional, and state conferences, as well as sponsored webinar series that reach national and international audiences, usually craft calls for proposals in advance of their events. Calls may be brief or quite long and detailed, but normally contain information about the:

- preferred topics,
- desired length of presentations,
- required elements for submissions,
- compensation (including any covered expenses),
- maximum number of proposals, and
- submission deadline.

Those who issue calls for proposals expect that we will follow the instructions laid out in the call. A proposal that does not follow the instructions will not make it through the first cut when the committee is reviewing submissions.

Understanding the Proposal Process

Before diving into proposal writing, it's important to realize that a proposal is a job application. Speakers want to be hired to speak, and program chairs and conference planners want to hire the best candidates for the open presentation slots. Putting our best foot forward and carefully crafting our proposals is important.

It's also important to consider that the committee selecting speakers for a conference or webinar series may receive a hundred or more proposals. To be competitive, we must follow instructions, submit presentations that fit the call, and make our proposals interesting and fresh.

One of the realities of responding to calls is that writing proposals takes time away from other work activities. Every call asks for slightly different information or asks for that information in a different order or format. This can cause frustration and lead



to producing substandard proposals. It's important to commit to the process and write the best proposals we can.

Finding Calls for Proposals

Calls can be found in several places online:

- APG's Speaking and Teaching member group¹
- Conference Keeper²
- Transitional Genealogists Forum³
- Genealogical Speakers Guild⁴
- Genealogical society websites and newsletters

As our reputation as a reliable speaker grows, we may even be personally invited to submit proposals for a conference or webinar series.

Deciding to Propose

A decision to respond to a call should first be based on practical considerations. The most basic is whether we're available at the time the event is taking place or on the days and times the webinar series is held. If we're not, or if the event requires travel we're unwilling to undertake, that may be disappointing, but the decision is an easy no.

Next, is the compensation offered sufficient for us, especially if travel is required? That decision doesn't just mean expenses will be covered or we'll come home with money in our pockets. Speaking that involves travel rarely makes a profit, though webinar series and virtual conferences usually do. But speaking has other benefits besides monetary ones: gaining exposure, enhancing our reputations, and allowing us to network with other genealogists. However, if the compensation offered is below what's customary,

1. APG's Speaking and Teaching member group, apgen.org/groups/speakers-instructors. You must be logged in as a member to access member groups. APG will have a similar feature on the new website.

2. Conference Keeper, conferencekeeper.org/call-for-papers.

3. Transitional Genealogists Forum, groups.io/g/transitional-genealogists-forum.

4. Genealogical Speakers Guild, genealogicalspeakersguild.org/call-for-proposals.

it may not be worthwhile to propose for that conference. It's customary for an in-person conference to offer a full-conference registration, an honorarium per presentation, and reasonable travel expenses. Virtual conferences offer a full-conference registration and an honorarium per presentation. Webinar series offer an honorarium.

Finally, we must be able to submit our proposals by the deadline given in the call. If our workload doesn't allow us to meet the deadline, we should not expect to be able to submit late.

Reading the Call Again and Analyzing It

A successful proposal responds to what the program committee asks for. Understanding what the planners want and how our repertoire of presentations might meet that need is key to being hired to speak.

Theme. Most conferences have a theme, but it's rare for a webinar series to have one. A well-crafted theme should express the conference's overarching educational mission and be our first clue to what the planners are looking for. For example, a theme of "Trails West" would be quite different from one themed "Coming to America."

List of topics. Calls usually have a list of preferred topics. These lists may be vague or specific. Most will include a category related to "Methodology" or "Research Methods." Most will also

include a category for "Records and Repositories," which may be limited to the state or region in which the conference is held. Using DNA for genealogy is generally included in topic lists these days. Beyond those staple topics, pay particular attention to what else the call specifies. Are they looking for ethnic research, getting started in genealogy, military records, or writing?

Time limitations. Most calls ask for fifty-minute presentations, plus ten minutes for questions. Some ask for sixty-minute presentations with fifteen minutes for questions. We must adhere to these limitations when we consider what to propose.

Formats. Some calls invite proposals for panels or workshops, both of which require skill and experience to manage successfully. Panels need a moderator to keep the discussion moving smoothly. Workshops are usually two to three hours long and often require interactive elements and hands-on exercises.

Number of proposals. Calls will specify the number of proposals a speaker may submit. The best approach is always to submit the maximum number of proposals about a variety of topics that fit what the planners are looking for. That gives us the best chance of having one or more proposals accepted.

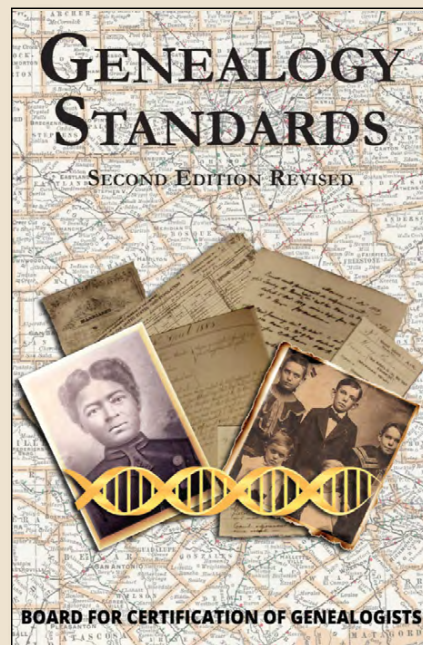
Other limitations. Some calls specify that presentations provide examples from the state or region of the sponsoring group.

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Matching Our Presentations to the Call

Once we've thoroughly analyzed what the planners are telling us they want, it's time to see what presentations we already have "in the can" that might fit as is or with a little modification. Take the list of desired topics in the call and note where existing presentations might fit on that topic list.

For example, a presentation about probate records can become a presentation about Georgia probate records with some additional research and examples from that state. A presentation about timelines can target a New York audience with new examples. Any one of our presentations about methods and records can be tailored to a call's specific requirements.

Proposing New Presentations

We should also consider proposing new presentations in response to the call, provided we have the time to develop them. This gives us a chance to write new presentations about topics we want to explore, and often these presentations will become popular choices when other societies ask us to speak. A presentation I am often asked to do, "The Erie Canal and the Opening of the Midwest," was one I originally proposed for a conference and was accepted.

Sometimes thinking about two or more categories on the desired topics list is an inspiration for a new presentation. If the planners want topics about immigrant communities and military service, we might propose a presentation about the Irish Brigade in the Civil War. Thinking of methodology along with migration can inspire a case study that shows how we followed a family as they moved.

Writing the Proposals

Once we have a list of possible presentations to propose, we winnow it down to the best five or six (or whatever the maximum number is). Now we're ready to write the proposals.

Many proposals are submitted through an online portal using Google Docs or another platform. The link to the portal will be in the call. Be aware that the call itself might not list the required proposal elements; it may be necessary to check the online portal to see what information the planners require. Printing out the blank proposal form or noting what's required in each section is a good practice.

Armed with the information the planners want, write the proposals in a word processing document, not directly in the submission form. This minimizes the possibility of accidentally pushing the submit button early. Once the document is complete, we can copy and paste its sections into the form. We can also save it so there's a record of what was proposed that we can refer to for future proposals to the same organization.

It's customary for each presentation to be proposed individually, but all proposals should be submitted at the same time.

Standard information. The first part of the proposal will be standard items like name and contact information.

Biography. Calls usually request a biography, and they may limit the number of words. Pay attention to that limit and do not exceed it. It can be a challenge to write a bio that is, say, fifty words, but it can be done. Emphasize what's most important about what you have to offer as a speaker. Save those short bios, along with a note of the word count, in a document for future proposals.

Speaking experience. Most calls want information about our speaking experience. They may want a list of presentations given in the last one or two years. Sometimes they don't specify a timeframe. This should be fairly easy to put together, as most of us keep records of our speaking engagements. For those new to speaking or whose lists are short, consider adding a statement about speaking experience about non-genealogy topics.

Presentation title and description. Calls often specify a word limit for our titles and presentation descriptions. Be sure not to exceed those limits. While writing the description within the word limit can be difficult, it challenges us to describe the presentation concisely and focus on what's truly important.

Outline. Some calls ask for an outline of the presentation. If we're proposing an existing talk, this is easily done. If we're proposing a new presentation, we need to think through the bones of it to create an outline. Sometimes writing the outline requires some research, but we need to give the committee an accurate idea of what we have in mind for the presentation.

Audience level. Planners usually ask us to assign an audience level to our presentations. The levels we use to describe genealogy presentations are not well defined, but in general, beginner is for those folks who are starting out, intermediate covers the vast middle of genealogists, and advanced signals a presentation for which attendees must have well-developed skills and experience. There may be an "all" category, indicating that there is something for everyone in the presentation.

Once we've written all this out in our word processing document, we can open up the submission form and copy and paste the information into the form.

Submitting Proposals and Waiting

Most, though not all, organizations will acknowledge our submissions. While we never want to pester the program committee, we can ask for an acknowledgment of our submissions if we don't receive one. It could be that the submissions didn't go through, and we need to resubmit.

Then we wait. It's customary for planners to first contact those whose presentations they accept to make sure the speakers are still available and willing to present. Planners will contact their next choices if speakers decline or drop out until the program is full. At

that point, they will contact those whose presentations were not accepted.

If our presentations are declined, it doesn't mean they aren't good. More likely, it means our proposals didn't fit the planners' vision of what their program would look like. Do not ask the planners why they didn't select your proposals. That puts them on the spot in an uncomfortable way, and they will remember that. Instead, ask a fellow speaker if they will take a look at what you proposed and offer suggestions for next time.

Always be gracious. Whether we're thanking the planners for choosing our presentation(s) and telling them how thrilled we are or thanking them for letting us know we weren't chosen, we thank them.

Managing Proposals

Successful speakers manage the proposals they send out to various organizations. It's important to have a system that tracks what we've proposed each year for a conference or webinar series so we don't propose something again that was accepted two years ago by that organization. That would be embarrassing. It's okay to propose something that wasn't accepted in a previous year if it fits a current call because it might work for the program the planners envision this time around. But we don't want to keep

proposing the same presentations year after year. That tells the planners we're not serious about giving them our best.

Final Thoughts

Opening that gate between ourselves and the wider audience for our presentations requires all our analysis and problem-solving skills to ensure we understand the call and submit proposals that meet the criteria. We owe it to ourselves and the conference and webinar organizers to put our best foot forward as we apply for speaking jobs.



Annette Burke Lyttle, CG, owns *Heritage Detective LLC*, providing professional genealogical services in research, education, and writing. She speaks about a variety of genealogical topics at the international, national, state, and local levels and loves helping people uncover and share their family stories. Annette is the coordinator of four Salt Lake Institute of Genealogy courses, including *Foundations: The Research Process* and *Bring 'Em Back to Life: Writing Our Ancestors' Stories*. She is past president of APG and editor of *The Florida Genealogist*.

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