REVIEWS/ESSAYS

How to Review Conference Proposals (and Why You Should Bother)

Sarah Theule Lubienski[1]

This essay provides advice for effectively reviewing conference proposals, including how to write comments that are helpful to proposal authors, how to use the "Comments to Program Chair" box, and issues to consider when assigning proposal ratings and recommending acceptance or rejection. Several benefits of reviewing proposals are outlined along with advice for becoming a reviewer. This essay is situated within the American Educational Research Association conference context and considers how reviewing conference proposals differs from that of journal articles. Still, much of the advice provided is applicable to scholarly reviewing, more generally.

Keywords: assessment; faculty development; research methodology; writing

The number of proposals submitted for the American Educational Research Association (AERA) annual meeting has grown dramatically in past decades. In 1976, AERA reported a record number of submissions with nearly 2,000 proposals submitted (AERA, 1976). By 1982, the number reached over 3,000 (AERA, 1982) and then neared 5,000 at the turn of the century (AERA, 2000). With advances in electronic submissions, by 2008 there were 12,000 submissions (AERA, 2008). Since then, proposal numbers have increased more slowly, averaging roughly 13,000 the past 5 years.[1] Overall, since 1976, the number of proposal submissions has increased more than sixfold, far outpacing the growth in AERA's membership.[2] Hence, it is not surprising that securing enough proposal reviews is sometimes a challenge for AERA conference organizers, as reviewers are in demand now more than ever.

AERA requires proposals to be submitted to one of three entities: (a) a specific AERA division (or section within a division), (b) an AERA committee, or (c) a special interest group (SIG). Regardless of where a proposal is submitted, program chairs are expected to obtain at least three reviews for each proposal.

As part of my duties as program chair of a relatively large SIG, I had the privilege of managing its review process for the 2019 annual meeting. Thanks to the generous efforts of 124 reviewers, I obtained roughly 300 reviews of the 163 proposals submitted. The review timeline is fairly tight, allowing only a few weeks for reviewers to complete their reviews and then 6 weeks for program chairs to use those reviews to make decisions about which proposals to include in the program and

whether accepted proposals will be part of a paper, roundtable, or poster session. Clear, insightful proposal reviews are essential for good decision making and for helping authors in our field push their work forward.

Similar to most conference review processes, AERA provides reviewers with a set of criteria for rating each proposal, including its objectives, methods, and significance. There is also a short video available to reviewers, which briefly outlines these aspects, as well as more general issues, such as handling conflicts of interest.[3] Despite this guidance for reviewers, I noticed that the length, tone, and scope of the reviews I received varied widely. I found some reviews especially helpful, and I began to analyze the characteristics of those strong reviews as well as the weaknesses in other, less helpful reviews.

Writing good reviews is an important skill that can be improved with practice and guidance. Several journal editors have provided advice for writing good article reviews. For example, Silver (2003) notes the need for reviews to play a dual role of being educative as well as evaluative. With a focus on the educative role, Crespo (2016) draws from Elbow's (2000) framework of doubting versus believing, as she argues that reviewers should avoid approaching a manuscript in search of errors and omissions (doubting) and instead assume the author's claims have merit (believing) and look for ways to strengthen and improve them.

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