**Tips for Writing Conference Paper Abstracts**

**From NC State History Department**

[**https://history.ncsu.edu/grad/conference\_abstracts.php**](https://history.ncsu.edu/grad/conference_abstracts.php)

Typically, an abstract describes the topic you would like to present at the conference, highlighting your argument, evidence and contribution to the historical literature. It is usually restricted to 250-500 words. The word limit can be challenging: some graduate students do not fret over the short limit and hastily write and submit an abstract at the last minute, which often hurts their chances of being accepted; other students try to condense the Next Great American Novel into 250 words, which can be equally damning. Graduate students who approach the abstract early, plan accordingly, and carefully edit are the ones most often invited to present their research. For those who are intimidated by the project, don’t be – the abstract is a fairly standardized form of writing. Follow the basic guidelines below and avoid common pitfalls and you will greatly improve your abstract.

# Quick Tips

### Comply

Diligently follow all abstract style and formatting guidelines. Most CFPs will specify page or word length, and perhaps some layout or style guidelines. Some CFPs, however, will list very specific restrictions, including font, font size, spacing, text justification, margins, how to present quotes, how to present authors and works, whether to include footnotes or not. Make sure that you strictly adhere to all guidelines, including submission instructions. If a CFP does not provide abstract style and formatting guidelines, it is generally appropriate to stay around 250 words – abstract committees read a lot of these things and do not look fondly on comparatively long abstracts. Make sure that you orient your abstract topic to address any specific CFP themes, time periods, methods, and/or buzzwords.

### Be Concise

With a 250-500 word limit, write only what is necessary, avoiding wordiness. Use active voice and pay attention to excessive prepositional phrasing.

### Be Clear

Plan your abstract carefully before writing it. A good abstract will address the following questions: What is the historical question or problem? Contextualize your topic. What is your thesis/argument? It should be original. What is your evidence? State forthrightly that you are using primary source material. How does your paper fit into the historiography? What's going on in the field of study and how does your paper contribute to it? Why does it matter? We know the topic is important to you, why should it be important to the abstract selection committee?

You should be as specific as possible, avoiding overly broad or overreaching statements and claims. And that’s it: don’t get sidetracked by writing too much narrative or over explaining. Say what you need to say and nothing more.

Keep your audience in mind. How much background you give on a topic will depend on the conference. Is the conference a general humanities conference, a general graduate student history conference, or something more specific like a 1960s social revolutions conference? Your pitch should be suited to the specificity of the conference: the more specific the topic, the less broad background you need to give and vice versa.

### Be Clean

Revise and edit your abstract to ensure that its final presentation is error free. The editing phase is also the best time to see your abstract as a whole and chip away at unnecessary words or phrases. The final draft should be linear and clear and it should read smoothly. If you are tripping over something while reading, the abstract selection committee will as well. Ask another graduate student to read your abstract to ensure its clarity or attend a Graduate Student Writing Group meeting.

Your language should be professional and your style should adhere to academic standards. Contractions may be appealing because of the word limits, but they should be avoided. If citation guidelines are not specifically given, it is appropriate to use the author’s name and title of work (in either italics or quotation marks) within the text rather than use footnotes or in-text citations.

# Common Pitfalls to Avoid

### Misusing Questions

While one question, if really good, may be posed in your abstract, you should avoid writing more than one (maybe two, if really really good). If you do pose a question or two, make sure that you either answer it or address why the question matters to your conference paper – unless you are posing an obvious rhetorical question, you should never just let a question hang there. Too many questions takes up too much space and leaves less room for you to develop your argument, methods, evidence, historiography, etc. Often times, posing too many questions leaves the abstract committee wondering if you are going to address one or all in your paper and if you even know the answers to them. Remember, you are not expected to have already written your conference paper, but you are expected to have done enough research that you are prepared to write about a specific topic that you can adequately cover in 15-20 minutes. Prove that you have done so.

### Extraneous Jargon and Over-the-Top Phrasing

Language that helps you be as specific as possible in presenting your argument is great but don’t get your readers bogged down in jargon. They will be reading a lot of abstracts and will not want to wade through the unnecessary language. Keep it simple.

### Repetition of Claims

When students repeat claims, they often don’t realize they are doing so. Sometimes this happens because students are not yet clear on their argument. Think about it some more and then write. Other times, students write carelessly and do not proofread. Make sure each sentence is unique and that it contributes to the flow of your abstract.

### Writing too Broadly about a Topic

The abstract committee does not need to be reminded of the grand sweep of history in order to contextualize your topic. Place your topic specifically within the historiography.

# Samples

The samples below represent the five highest scoring samples submitted to the selection committee for the ninth annual graduate student history conference, 2012-2013. Two of the samples below were subsequently selected for publication in the [*NC State Graduate Journal of History*](http://gjh.ojs.chass.ncsu.edu/). Outstanding papers presented at the graduate student history conference are recommended for publication by panel commentators. Papers go through a peer review process before publication.

### Sample 1: “Asserting Rights, Reclaiming Space: District of Marshpee v. Phineas Fish, 1833-1843”

From May of 1833 to March of 1834, the Mashpee Wampancag tribe of Cape Cod Massachusetts waged an aggressive campaign to gain political and religious autonomy from the state. In March of 1834, the Massachusetts legislature passed an act disbanding the white guardians appointed to conduct affairs for the Mashpee tribe and incorporated Mashpee as an Indian district. The Mashpee tribe's fight to restore self-government and control over land and resources represents a significant "recover of Native space." Equally significant is what happened once that space was recovered.

The topic of this paper addresses an understudied and essential period in the history of the Mashpee Wampanoag tribe. Despite a growing body of literature on the Mashpee, scholars largely neglect the period between 1834 and 1869. This paper looks as the Mashpee tribe's campaign to dismiss Harvard appointed minister Phineas Fish; the fight to regain the parsonage he occupied, its resources, and the community meetinghouse. This paper will argue the tribe asserted its power within the political and physical landscape to reclaim their meetinghouse and the parsonage land. Ultimately, this assertion contributed to shaping, strengthening, and remaking Mashpee community identity. This study examines legislative reports, petitions, letters, and legal documents to construct a narrative of Native agency in the antebellum period. [Note: This is part of my larger thesis project (in progress0 "Mashpee Wampanoag Government Formation and the Evolving Community Identity in the District of Marshpee, 1834-1849."]

Note: This paper, entitled "[Testing Rights in Contested Space: The District of Marshpee versus Reverend Phineas Fish, 1833-1839](http://gjh.ojs.chass.ncsu.edu/index.php/Graduate/article/view/17)" was subsequently selected for publication in the NC State Graduate Journal of History.

### Sample 2: “Private Paths to Public Places: Local Actors and the Creation of National Parklands in the American South”

This paper explores the connections between private individuals, government entities, and non-governmental organizations in the creation of parklands throughout the American South. While current historiography primarily credits the federal government with the creation of parks and protection of natural wonders, an investigation of parklands in the Southern United States reveals a reoccurring connection between private initiative and park creation. Secondary literature occasionally reflects the importance of local and non-government sources for the preservation of land, yet these works still emphasize the importance of a national bureaucracy setting the tone fore the parks movement. Some works, including Jacoby's Crimes Against Nature examine local actors, but focus on opposition to the imposition of new rules governing land in the face of some outside threat. In spite of scholarly recognition of non-government agencies and local initiative, the importance of local individuals in the creation of parklands remains and understudies aspect of American environmental history. Several examples in the American South raise concerns about the traditional narrative pitting governmental hegemony against local resistance. This paper argues for widespread, sustained interest in both nature preservation and in creating spaces for public recreation at the local level, and finds that the "private path to public parks" merits further investigation.

Note: This paper, entitled "[Private Paths to Public Parks in the American South](http://gjh.ojs.chass.ncsu.edu/index.php/Graduate/article/view/9)" was subsequently selected for publication in the NC State Graduate Journal of History.

### Sample 3: Untitled

Previous generations of English Historians have produced a rich literature about the Levellers and their role in the English Civil Wars (1642-1649), primarily focused on the Putney Debates and their contributions to Anglophone legal and political thought. Typically, their push to extend the franchise and espousal of a theory of popular sovereignty has been central to accounts of Civil War radicalism. Other revisionist accounts depict them as a fragmented sect of millenarian radicals whose religious bent marginalized and possibility that they could make lasting contributions to English politics or society. This paper seeks to locate a Leveller theory of religious toleration, while explaining how their conception of political activity overlapped their religious ideas. Rather than focusing on John Lilburne, often taken as the public face of the Leveller movement, this paper will focus on the equally interesting and far more consistent thinker, William Walwyn. Surveying his personal background, published writings, popular involvement in the Leveller movement, and attacks launched by his critics, I hope to suggest that Walwyn's unique contribution to Anglophone political thought was his defense of religious pluralism in the face of violent sectarians who sought to wield control of the Church of England. Although the Levellers were ultimately suppressed, Walwyn's commitment to a tolerant society and a secular state should not be minimized but rather recognized as part of a larger debate about Church-State relations across early modern Europe. Ultimately this paper aims to contribute to the rich historiography of religious toleration and popular politics more broadly.

### Sample 4: “Establishing a National Memory of Citizen Slaughter: A Case Study of the First Memory Site to Mass Murder in United States History - Edmond, Oklahoma, 1986-1989”

Since 1989, memory sites to events of mass murder have not only proliferated rapidly--they have become the normative expectation within American society. For the vast majority of American history, however, events commonly labeled as "mass murder" have resulted in no permanent memory sites and the sites of perpetration themselves have traditionally been either obliterated or rectified so that both the community and the nation could forget the tragedy and move on. This all changed on May 29, 1989 when the community of Edmond, Oklahoma officially dedicated the "Golden Ribbon" memorial to the thirteen people killed in the infamous "post office shooting" of 1986. In this paper I investigate the case of Edmond in order to understand why it became the first memory site of this kind in United States history. I argue that the small town of Edmond's unique political abnormalities on the day of the shooting, coupled with the near total community involvement established ideal conditions for the emergence of this unique type of memory site. I also conduct a historiography of the usage of "the ribbon" in order to illustrate how it has become the symbol of memories of violence and death in American society in the late 20th century. Lastly, I illustrate how the notable lack of communication between people involved in the Edmond and Oklahoma City cases after the 1995 Murrah Federal Building bombing--despite the close geographic and temporal proximity of these cases--illustrates this routinely isolated nature of commemorating mass murder and starkly renders the surprising number of aesthetic similarities that these memory sites share.

### Sample 5: “Roman Urns and Sarcophagi: The Quest for Postmortem Identity during the Pax Romana”

"If you want to know who I am, the answer is ash and burnt embers;" thus read an anonymous early Roman's burial inscription. The Romans dealt with death in a variety of ways which incorporated a range of cultural conventions and beliefs--or non-beliefs as in the case of the "ash and embers." By the turn of the first century of this era, the Romans practiced cremation almost exclusively--as the laconic eloquence of the anonymous Roman also succinctly explained. Cremation vanished by the third century, replaced by the practice of the distant past by the fifth century. Burial first began to take hold in the western Roman Empire during the early second century, with the appearance of finely-crafted sarcophagi, but elites from the Roman world did not discuss the practices of cremation and burial in detail. Therefore archaeological evidence, primarily in form of burial vessels such as urns and sarcophagi represented the only place to turn to investigate the transitional to inhumation in the Roman world. This paper analyzed a small corpus of such vessels in order to identify symbolic elements which demarcate individual identities in death, comparing the patterns of these symbols to the fragments of text available relating to death in the Roman world. The analysis concluded that the transition to inhumantion was a movement caused by an increased desire on the part of Romans to preserve identity in death during and following the Pax Romana.

More Info:

<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/752/1/>

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