



american
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**Preserving Cultural
Heritage**

Tips for Writing an Effective AIC Annual Meeting Abstract

An abstract for the annual meeting serves a similar purpose to the abstract of a scholarly paper with one important difference- in addition to providing a short and coherent summary of the project, it must also convince the reviewers that the work is important and interesting enough for them to select it for an oral presentation or a poster.

An abstract should:

- 1) Clearly describe the object(s) being treated or the research or project undertaken. Use plain English, limit jargon, and write for a general audience. If the reviewer can't understand what is being discussed or has been done, they are unlikely to select it for the conference.
- 2) Contextualize the importance of the object(s) or project concisely. Why would it be important for the audience to hear this talk? Is it an underrepresented type of object or from an understudied culture? Is the project a novel collaboration between institutions or fields? Is the treatment approach or analytical method new, or are new materials being used? What does the research contribute to the field? If you are studying something that has a large group of comparables (an Ancient Egyptian coffin, a painting by Reynolds, gelatin silver prints), what makes this study different? What new knowledge does this study add, and how do the findings fit in with what is known on this topic?? This section of the abstract is VERY important as you are essentially trying to sell your abstract to reviewers.
- 3) Concisely describe the methodology. What techniques were used? What did the treatment/project/research entail?
- 4) Summarize the results
- 5) State the principal conclusions and/or findings.

Different projects and different authors will weigh these different points differently, but some aspect of all five points should be included in an effective abstract.

Some additional points to consider:

The purpose of the abstract is to tell a story, so the flow should be logical. You know your topic better than anyone else, so things that seem obvious to you may be confusing for a non-expert reader. Try and step back and make sure you're not skipping necessary intellectual connections. Sometimes reading your abstract aloud will help you catch a lack of coherence. Friends and colleagues may also be good sounding boards.

The active voice is more engaging to readers than the passive voice. It is fine to say 'I' and 'we' in an abstract.

Be careful when using the future tense. Phrases like-'we will show' or 'this treatment will accomplish' give the impression that the work is incomplete, and this can be a red flag for reviewers. Although commonly used, phrases such as "This paper will discuss"-are largely a waste of space - the whole point of the abstract is to reveal what will be discussed.

Spelling and grammar matter. We appreciate that for many AIC members and submitters English is a second or third language; reviewers do acknowledge the difficulty of writing in your non-native language and take this into consideration when reviewing. However, if the reviewers cannot understand the abstract it is unlikely to be accepted.

You have 500 words; use them! While brevity may be the soul of wit, too short of an abstract may fail to provide enough information for reviewers to appreciate the work.

Titles matter - impactful and engaging titles will attract people to your presentation. While a humorous title might not be appropriate for a scholarly publication, it can appeal to audiences. Some engaging titles from the 2021 AIC annual meeting include:

String Theory: The Comparative Treatments of Two Musical Instruments

Put the Lime in the Coconut: An Investigation of the Mechanical and Aging Properties of Coconut Shell and Recommendations for Compatible Conservation Materials

Phantom Thread: Research and Preparation for the Care of a Delicate Silk and Metal Sculpture by Doris Salcedo

A Sticky Situation: The Preservation of Self-Adhesive Photograph Albums

I'm Rubber and You're Glue: Preliminary Investigations into Compatible Adhesives for Elastomeric Materials;

If you're writing an abstract for a poster submission, it helps reviewers if they can get a sense of what types of images may be included - an all-text poster is usually not appealing to attendees! You shouldn't list what images you will use but do think about how to convey the visual aspects of your project in the abstract. Subjects, methods, and techniques such as test coupons, mock-ups, XRF maps, etc. are inherently visual and reviewers will understand what types of images may be on the poster. Projects such as the history of a department or institution or a new community engagement program are harder for reviewers to visualize what a poster would look like.

For poster abstracts, you should also take care that the amount of information in your abstract is appropriate for a poster- describing the complete treatment of ten paintings in a poster is probably too ambitious as that amount of information would be unlikely to fit on a poster. Focusing in on one or two would be more appropriate for the space allotted.

Seeing the same project described in different abstracts versions will hopefully help illustrate the points above.

Reviews of several proposed abstracts:

Project 1: Redefining Seeing- Toni Laselle's Studio Practice and Working Methodologies

Abstract version 1

Two paintings by Dorothy Antoinette (Toni) LaSelle (1901-2002) based on a single study offer an opportunity to parse the evolution of her artistic vision. The canvas paintings *Puritan* (1947-1950), and *Puritan, Second Version* (1949-50), are about twice the size of *Study for Puritan* (1947), (oil on canvas board), but of different proportions; the abstract compositions of all feature circles, triangles and rectangles. Analyses, including macro-area XRF mapping, reveal significant differences in materials between the study and *Puritan* and LaSelle made significant alterations to both. In *Puritan*,

Second Version LaSelle further refined the composition and explored an entirely new color scheme.

Comments:

At 100 words, this abstract is simply too short. It provides no information on the artist and why the audience might find the project interesting. Without any context why would a reviewer or audience be interested in this project? The abstract does give some indication of methodology but fails to describe the results. What were the differences in materials? Why are the findings important? This comes across as a rather uninteresting technical study that might be appropriate for a poster but is unlikely to be selected for an oral presentation. To be blunt, this short of an abstract also comes across as a bit lazy - you don't want to pad an abstract unnecessarily with excess verbiage, but it just feels like the author didn't put a lot of time or effort into the writing - and if they don't care enough to produce a good abstract, will they care enough to produce a good talk or poster?

Abstract version 2

Dorothy Antoinette (Toni) LaSelle (1901-2002) was an American abstract painter, who studied with László Moholy-Nagy and Hans Hoffman. The Museum of Fine Arts Houston holds two of her paintings, *Study for Puritan* (1947) and *Puritan* (1947-1950), the former is oil on canvas board and the latter is an oil painting on canvas. The canvas painting is about twice the size of the sketch and at first glance, these works may seem nearly identical in composition featuring circles, triangles, and rectangles, but there are subtle differences and indications that LaSelle made alterations to the design of both. Macro-area XRF mapping, FTIR and Raman spectroscopy reveal significant differences in materials between the two works. The greens of the sketch are primarily viridian, with some phthalocyanine green while on the final painting LaSelle used viridian on only one area. The sketch once had regions of vermillion, which LaSelle chose to overpaint with gray, and in the painting a cadmium orange not present in the sketch was added. This is the first in-depth study of LaSelle's works, and illuminating these changes allows us to appreciate the evolution of her artistic vision and how she sought to balance the forms of her abstract composition.

Comments:

This abstract is slightly better; it includes some contextualization of who LaSelle was- American, someone who studied with more well-known artists (a bit of name dropping might not hurt!). The description of the works is still relatively cursory but the methodology and findings are more fleshed out. The phrase 'This is the first in-depth study of LaSelle's works' tries to sell the reviewer on why this

abstract should be chosen- an understudied artist. It is still much shorter than the allowed word limit (200 out of 500) leaving plenty of room for expansion.

Abstract version 3

Dorothy Antoinette (Toni) LaSelle (1901-2002), an artist, art historian and teacher, had an impressive career spanning six decades. A polymath undergraduate, her interest in art solidified during her senior year and she obtained a Master's degree in art history from the University of Chicago with a thesis on New Guinea masks. To support herself she accepted a teaching position at Texas Woman's University in Denton, TX in 1928 where she remained for the next 44 years. Well aware of the innovations in art happening elsewhere, she sought to expose her students to the avant-garde and invited renowned thinkers and artists to lecture, who then also informed her own studio practices. She studied with László Moholy-Nagy and Hans Hoffman, and the summers spent with the latter at his School of Fine Arts in Provincetown were particularly critical in the evolution of her own abstract style. Although she renounced representative art, she remained influenced by her environment, describing her working practice as "waiting in the presence of nature so all the energies could clear up and they could become a painting," presumably a pleasurable experience at the Provincetown beachfront. Her extensive career and success were localized to Texas, and she, as many groundbreaking female artists, has been denied a place in the art historical canon. Although her art pushed the boundaries of abstraction, she was overlooked and marginalized, and noted: "Women, are not credited with innovations."

Two paintings in the collection of The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, *Study for Puritan* (1947) and *Puritan* (1947-1950), made during her early career offer a rare opportunity to parse the evolution of her artistic vision. The canvas painting is about twice the size of the sketch on canvas board and at first glance may seem nearly identical in composition; circles, triangles and rectilinear forms in black, grey and shades of green interact on a white foreground/background. However, the painting exhibits more condition issues, and macro-area XRF mapping, FTIR and Raman spectroscopy reveal significant differences in materials, with refinements and alterations on both the sketch, which is to be expected, as well as the painting. The sketch once had regions of vermilion, which LaSelle chose to overpaint with gray, and in the painting a cadmium orange not present in the sketch was added. The greens of the sketch are primarily viridian, with some phthalocyanine green while on the final painting LaSelle used viridian on only one area. The paint application on the sketch is mainly thin and smooth, but on the painting she allowed her brushstrokes and revisions to show, the thick impasto enhancing the tension of shapes and color. Despite the preparatory sketch, the painting was not quickly or easily realized and shows LaSelle wrestling to

balance the 'push' and 'pull' of her abstract forms. She once insisted she was a "a painter who tried to teach," and if we know how to ask her paintings can indeed tell us about her and the struggles she faced and the innovations she achieved.

Comments:

This version of the abstract is 499 words and provides much more information than the other versions. The first paragraph contextualizes the artist and gives the reader enough information about her to appreciate why this project might be of interest to the audience (marginalized female artist, regional, involved in the abstract art movement). This is a lot of words devoted to contextualization, and the authors could have shortened it in order to provide more details to describe the actual project. The second paragraph then discusses the works studied, provides information on the analytical techniques used, and describes the major findings. LaSelle's voice is brought in, and in a way that highlights the importance of studying understudied or marginalized artists. This abstract conveyed the project well enough and was intriguing enough that it was selected by reviewers for the 49th Annual AIC meeting. It still might be a hard sell under other circumstances given the lack of widely applicable information.

Project 2: Conservation and Investigation of Ancient Bodies at Abydos: Challenging Work in Post-revolutionary Egypt

Abstract version 1

Excavations at Abydos during 2012 uncovered several graves in the sand at the base of a giant dune in the North Cemetery, including one well-furnished human burial from the Middle Kingdom (around 1800 BC) requiring urgent conservation intervention. The conservation and investigation of this burial is the focus of this article. The first phase of the project took place in 2012 and combined field conservation, block-lifting the body within the remains of the coffin, and transfer of the "block" to the on-site magazine at Abydos. Thanks to a grant from the American Research Center in Egypt, a small team returned to Abydos for five weeks in 2015 and three weeks in 2016 to complete the treatment, analysis, and investigation of this and other bio-archaeology remains. Careful planning was essential throughout the project to ensure that we had sufficient materials (both imported and sourced locally in Egypt) and suitable personnel in the field to carry out conservation treatment and investigation of the burial. Analytical equipment, including a Bruker portable x-ray fluorescence spectrometer and an Agilent portable Fourier transform infrared spectrometer, were imported to enable scientific

analysis and materials investigation in the field. The project was ambitious in its aims, striving to demonstrate that rigorous and high-quality research is possible in a challenging environment (regarding both logistics and resources) through the application of determination and ingenuity.

Comments:

This abstract uses about half of the allotted words. It describes where the field and conservation work was done and on what and provides an overview of the whole project without any specific details. Without the title, non-specialists may not know that Abydos is in Egypt. The sentence 'The conservation and investigation of this burial is the focus of this article' is probably unnecessary given the title and if word count was an issue should be removed. In general, it would help reviewers to hear more about the challenges and how they were overcome in order to help them assess whether these methods will be more widely applicable to other locations and contexts.

Abstract version 2

Excavations during the spring of 2012 at the North Cemetery at Abydos were eventful, with many chance finds discovered, including some beautiful furnished burials from the Middle Kingdom (around 1800BC) requiring urgent conservation intervention. It was one year after the January 25th revolution and tensions were high on site. The possible threat of illicit looting of the site for antiquities forced the archaeologists to keep work low-key while ensuring that methods used were as transparent as possible – in order to not provoke rumours or attract too much attention from the local villagers – and to satisfy the concerns and wishes of the Ministry of Antiquities authorities.

This paper will focus on two human burials discovered buried at the base of a giant sand dune in the North Cemetery. We will describe the conservation process, and how we managed to achieve our goals in a very challenging working environment. Due to remarkable natural preservation of hair, flesh and skin on the bodies, and textile wrappings encasing them, careful planning was necessary to find a method of maintaining the bodies intactness during and after excavation. A creative technique was employed for block-lifting the complete burials. Following transfer of the block-lifted burials, within wooden crates, to the onsite magazine in Abydos, they remained in storage until May 2015 when a grant from the American Research Center in Egypt allowed a small team to return to Abydos and continue the treatment and investigation. This was the second phase of the project, which took place in the midst of continued security fears, permit delays and limited access to the storage magazine.

This next step in the conservation process involved inverting the crates to allow treatment of the bases of the two wooden coffins beneath the bodies. Once the underside of the coffins had been conserved and supportive mounts constructed, the crates were turned upright once again, the sides of the crates and cushioning materials removed – exposing the bodies for the first time since excavation. Careful planning was essential to ensure we had sufficient materials on site for the conservation treatment. Nevertheless, because of the difficulties we faced importing or purchasing conservation grade materials in Egypt (even in Cairo), it was sometimes necessary to substitute imported supplies (such as adhesives for constructing the supportive backing of the burials) with local alternatives. Final conservation of the bodies and remaining coffins will be finished before the summer of 2016, in addition to the investigation, analysis and documentation of the project, allowing us to begin preparing the final publication. The project was ambitious in its aims, striving to demonstrate what it is possible to achieve with determination and resourcefulness – in a country where the logistics of working are becoming increasingly difficult.

Comments:

The greater word count allows the authors to better contextualize the conditions and pressure under which the work was being done, and increases the likelihood that people who might not particularly be interested in the treatment and preservation of burials might still attend the talk because of the societal and political context. It might help to know a bit about what the creative block lifting technique was and what the local materials were and why and how they were chosen, but with only 50 words left, the authors don't have a lot of room, and readers might be intrigued enough with the description to attend and learn. More space could be saved by removing phrases like 'This paper will focus' and 'we will describe' that aren't necessary. The authors have also not included the discussion of analytical equipment, choosing to focus on the project planning and conservation itself. Scientific analysis is not necessary for an abstract to be accepted! This version of the abstract was accepted and the talk presented at the AIC 2016 annual meeting so would have been submitted in the fall of 2015. Note that the authors were forthright that the work was not expected to be finished until the summer of 2016. However, the reviewers felt that even if the project wasn't fully able to be finished by the time of the presentation there was still sufficient information for a good talk.

Additional points:

As a reminder, please read the authorship guidelines carefully and abide by them. The AIC annual meeting is committed to appropriate credit being given to all individuals (see AIC authorship guidelines).

Also please note that author biographies should be a short descriptive paragraph that succinctly summarizes your education, training, and current location and position. If space allows past employment locations and specific research interests can also be mentioned. Bullet points are less useful for readers than full, descriptive sentences.