Submitting a Proposal to SCMS: Guide for Success

The Society for Cinema and Media Studies seeks to enable broad and diverse participation in its annual conference, including not only tenured faculty but also graduate students, and precariously employed scholars, from diverse geographic and national locations, and from within different subfields under the large umbrella of cinema and media studies, including various screen and audio cultures. At the same time, SCMS seeks excellence. In order to ensure this standard for the conference, we are offering advice to all those seeking to submit a proposal for the annual conference.

First, it helps if you understand the process of proposal evaluation. The Program Committee is charged with selecting the best proposals to create the annual conference program. The Program Committee has 29 members including its chair. At least six members of this committee are also members of the SCMS Board of Directors. Other members of the Program Committee are selected from the SCMS membership to balance the diversity and expertise represented by the Committee as a whole. The individual who serves as Program Committee Chair alternates between the SCMS president-elect and a member of the Board of Directors. The Program Committee is made up entirely of volunteers. You, as a member of SCMS, may volunteer to serve on the Program Committee and are encouraged to do so.

After your proposal is submitted online, the Program Committee Chair then assigns the proposal to a team of two readers from the Program Committee. The readers evaluate the proposal individually and then compare their respective scores. Readers look for originality, scope, and relevance and depth of research; the paper's contribution to the field; and the paper's suitability for a twenty-minute presentation. Secondarily, the readers consider whether the proposal has followed the rules for submission. A joint score is forwarded to the Program Committee Chair.

The Program Committee Chair will only weigh in on a decision in the event of a radically split vote (e.g., one committee member thinks a proposal is great, the other thinks it is terrible). The Chair does not overrule the decisions of the readers. After reading pairs make suggestions for placing open call papers together on panels, the Program Committee Chair assists the Conference Scheduler in finalizing panels from the open call and assigning the panels and workshops to time slots and rooms. Time and room assignments are based in some measure on equipment needs, and efforts are made not to have too many panels or workshops on similar topics competing in a single time slot or bunched together on a single day. Because of the complexity of putting the program together, requests for special times or days cannot be honored.

Next, it is useful to understand the proposal categories:
The open call is for individual papers. You submit your paper and then it is placed with three other papers to form a panel. Individual papers should be new work – not previously published, not presented previously at SCMS.

A pre-constituted panel is a panel consisting of four speakers or three speakers and a respondent. Panels are not random assemblages of papers but papers joined deliberately to explore a particular topic. Each paper should be new work.

Workshops are interactive discussions led by one or two facilitators. They may include additional speakers but should emphasize potential participation by all session attendees (such as sharing best practices, working on a text together, role-playing an interview, demonstrating a technique, or any other productive interaction). Workshops typically focus on professional development, pedagogical issues, institutional issues (preparing dossiers for tenure cases, mentoring graduate students and junior faculty members), disciplinary and administrative issues (developing an academic program in film or media, academic freedom, departmental governance on issues of pedagogy and so forth), and so forth. There may be a workshop on a scholarly topic but it must make clear how it will involve participants beyond discussion.

Roundtables are discussion sessions with a chair and four or five speakers who speak for no more than 5 minutes each and then participate in a discussion led by a facilitator. Roundtables typically focus on scholarly topics. There may be a roundtable on a professional/pedagogical issue: it is more a question of format than topic. When proposing a roundtable, proposers should make clear what expertise each speaker brings and what aspect of the topic they will each address. Furthermore, while the purpose of the roundtable is to foster discussion amongst the speakers about the topic, the format should also allow time for comments and questions from the audience. Neither workshops nor roundtables should have people presenting papers or speaking more than 5 minutes to open a conversation.

Seminars are sessions in which participants will submit short papers in advance and everyone will read each other's papers before the conference. The seminars will therefore function as a colloquium.

To increase your chances of having your proposal accepted:

Be sure to follow the rules:

Deadlines are firm. SCMS has on average 1500 to 2000 submissions per year. The SCMS Home Office cannot accommodate special requests or extensions on proposal deadlines. Do not wait until the last minute to prepare your proposal.

Do not submit proposals in more than one category. You may either present a paper on a panel or participate in a workshop. You may chair the panel or workshop you are on, but may not serve as chair of another panel or respondent on a panel if you are otherwise participating on a panel or workshop. **An exception: You may propose or join a seminar in addition to serving in one other role**.

Do not submit if you are not likely to attend the conference. It is impolite and unprofessional to cancel. If you submit an abstract and then decide not to go, you have diminished the panel, taken a slot that someone else could have used, and wasted lots of people's time. Try to discuss funding with your institution before you submit, to make sure that you can attend. Look at other commitments (teaching load, articles, contracts) to make sure you will have time to write.

Take time to consider your options:

Consider the benefits of submitting a pre-constituted panel vs. an open call paper.
Pre-constituted panels generally have a higher rate of acceptance than individual papers. When you submit an individual paper, you risk being placed on a panel that may not be ideally suited to your topic. Given that the program committee has to compile panels of very diverse papers, sometimes connections among papers are loose. On occasion, this creates exciting and dynamic panels that would not otherwise happen. However, sometimes panelists feel that they are speaking to the wrong audience or in the wrong conversation.

While it may seem daunting to put together a panel, SCMS has mechanisms to help you find appropriate people for your topic. You can post your panel idea to the Forum/CFP Bulletin Board on the SCMS website or find panels there that you can join, or you can take advantage of your membership in a SIG or Caucus and post panel proposals through its listserv.

If you submit to the open call, try to articulate how your paper might relate to work others are doing. The open call is not the place for your most obscure idea, or a topic that will be hard to place alongside others. Be mindful of how you want your paper placed, articulate how your papers works in relation to currents in the field, and use keywords in your abstract (star studies, archive, history, genre) that will help make sure it finds a good home.

Start early. Putting together a panel takes time. If you are using the Forum/CFP Bulletin Board, you need time to find the right people and secure their commitment. You must find the right speaker, collect their abstracts, and write the panel abstract. Allow yourself a few weeks to prepare your panel so that you can submit on time.

Create a diverse and dynamic panel. By SCMS rule, you may not have more than two people from the same institution on a panel without offering justification for doing so. Think about getting different perspectives, different approaches to a topic. Try to avoid monolithic groups (ex. all tenured faculty, from the same kind of institution). Try to mix grad students and professors, men and women, race and identity positions, people from community colleges and Ivy League institutions, etc. Some excellent panels have a narrow tightly rationalized focus on a single figure, period or national cinema. However, you may wish to diversify within your topic –instead of a panel on radio, consider sound in diverse media, or consider looking at horror in diverse nations, or bring historians and theoreticians together to broaden

your potential audience and to engage different approaches. SCMS supports panels composed of members from international or underrepresented institutions (community colleges, HBCUs, etc) and recognizes that they may benefit from including more than two people from the same institution. If this applies to your panel, please provide a clear justification for an exception to this rule.

Take care with the written proposal:

Compose your proposal carefully. Do not type your abstract directly into the proposal form. Type it separately so you can proofread it and then paste it into the form. Make sure you include all required materials – abstract, bio, bibliography and keywords. Proofread. Make sure your proposal is the appropriate length. The proposal form will not allow you to submit an overly long abstract but beware of submitting one that is too short. You need more than a few sentences to make clear why your paper is interesting.

Write an excellent abstract. Effective proposals are well written and conform to the length requirement of the proposal system. Abstracts should be appropriate to the format in which the research will be presented (individual paper, pre-constituted panel, workshop, or roundtable).

- A good panel proposal must connect all the papers to a coherent theme or question. Do not rehash the paper abstracts. Members of the program committee will read individual abstracts and do not need the panel chair to summarize them. Instead, the panel chairs should make a case for the panel. Why does it matter? Who should care? What issue or question does this address? What intervention does it provide? How do the papers on the panel fit around the panel's theme?
- A good workshop proposal makes clear how the workshop will involve participants, why the topic is best served by a workshop rather than a panel, what kind of topic or issue it addresses, and what expertise participants bring to the topic. Workshops should not be panels in disguise. Your proposal should make clear how attendees will be involved – is there an activity? A conversation? A demonstration? etc.
- A good roundtable panel will make clear what question or topic drives the roundtable; what each speaker bring to the roundtable; how speakers will complement, challenge or counter each other's views. Roundtables should not be panels in disguise but should be aimed primarily at producing conversation.
- A good seminar proposal will make clear why the topic is significant and how it will appeal to a broad spectrum of SCMS members, ideally combining various media, approaches, nationalities, etc. It will have clearly articulated goals. It should have some indication of how it will be structured. Seminars are open to anyone who signs up, so should not be designed as a meeting for only friends or close collaborators.

If you have not presented at a conference before, show an experienced scholar your proposal before you submit it. An extra set of eyes always helps.

Once your paper, panel or workshop is accepted:
Keep your commitments. Plan ahead. Book your flight and hotel room as soon as your paper or panel is accepted, or at least as soon as the first draft of the conference goes online. If you submitted a proposal, you made a commitment to attend. If you withdraw from a panel, you will disappoint many people. Being overworked is not an excuse. Every person on the panel has multiple commitments. You may not withdraw and then ask to attend via Skype or have someone else read your paper – that is not acceptable. It means you present at the conference but do not register for the conference, which cheats others. If you have a medical emergency or family death or other very very good reason to cancel, make sure you notify the other panelists, the panel chair and the home office to see if you can be removed from the program.

If you apply to be a participant in a seminar, plan to be at the conference on Sunday. If you apply, you must commit to attending and doing whatever reading and homework the seminar leader(s) assign. You may apply to be an auditor and should do so if you are not prepared to fully participate. However, even auditors must expect to attend the conference on Sunday. Do not consider a seminar if you cannot commit to Sunday.

Stick to the time limits.

- Papers are generally no more than 20 minutes, possibly less if the panel has a respondent. Time your paper in advance. Include all clips when you time it. Realize that twenty minutes is only about 8-10 pages depending on your clips and images. If your paper is too long, cut it. Do not exceed the time limit. It is unfair to other speakers and to attendees who want time for questions and discussion.
- For workshops and roundtables, you should speak no more than 5 minutes. Here, you are not delivering a paper: you are framing a topic, introducing a question, or providing a very brief summary of your issue. Make sure that the majority of time is devoted to engaging attendees in work or conversation.

If your paper is due in advance of the conference for a respondent, send it in by the deadline, if not earlier. If you commit to something that requires you to submit early, then you must prepare in advance and write your essay ahead of time. Do not place others in an uncomfortable situation of having to respond to a paper at the last minute.

If your paper is due early for a seminar, send it in by the deadline, if not earlier. If you commit to something that requires you to submit early, then you must prepare in advance and write your essay ahead of time. If you do not submit your essay, you will be dropped from the seminar as a participant.

If you have not previously presented at a conference, practice your paper, ideally with an audience (friends, fellow scholars) to time your talk and to hear what it sounds like. Is it clear? Do your clips and slides match what you are saying? Are you mumbling, speaking too low or too

loud, weirdly touching your ears?

Be mindful of technology. Try to coordinate with the panel chair ahead of time to put all presentations on one laptop and to make sure you know how you will share your presentation with that person (google drive, flash drive, via email, etc.). If you need to access clips online, test them in the room before the panel starts to be sure you can access them. Arrive to your panel room early to troubleshoot any technical issues that may arise.

Be attentive. Listen to your fellow panelists. Talk to them, ask questions. And talk to other panelists in other sessions, too. The conference is a place to share ideas, meet colleagues and have fun.

Helpful Tips for using the SCMS conference proposal system:

Tip #1: Save your proposal often to avoid lost information.

Tip #2: Proof the proposal carefully before submitting. Once a proposal is submitted, you cannot access it to make changes.

Tip #3: Steps for successfully submitting a proposal:

1. Enter the required information
2. Upload your paper(s)
3. Save your work
4. Proof your submission
5. Click “submit”

Tip #4: Submit early.

Please submit your proposal in a timely fashion to avoid any last minute technological issues or other unforeseen events. Late proposals will not be accepted. **The deadline to apply to participate in a seminar will be after papers are accepted in November.**

Looking for a paper topic? Visit the SCMS Conference Bulletin Board here:
http://www.cmstudies.org/?ConfBBoard

Ready to submit? Access the conference proposal portal here:
scms-conference.secure-platform.com