Tell your story: Tips for developing a successful conference abstract

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In our current dynamic health-care environment, dissemination of data obtained through nursing research and/or quality improvement (QI) projects is paramount. Information that emerges from research and projects can be disseminated through several avenues, including podium and poster presentations or written publications.

Nurses are expert clinicians but not necessarily expert writers. Although presenting at a conference can be an important aspect of professional development, few nurses receive formal training or mentorship to prepare them for research, publication, or oral/poster presentations. All too often, the idea of being a nurse author is associated with being in academia or a researcher. Nurses often reject the notion of writing, dismissing it as time-consuming and too challenging.

Historically, the writing landscape for nurses has been in journals; however, over the last 10 years, we’ve seen an increase in research dissemination through nursing conference presentations. Although many people consider public speaking to be daunting, disseminating research and findings from QI projects through conference presentations provides an opportunity to share insights and network with professional peers.

To be considered for a conference presentation, an abstract—a summary of the key points to be presented—is often necessary. The goal of the abstract is to convince the conference organizers that the information is worthy of dissemination. This article presents steps for developing and submitting a conference abstract, as well as strategies for success.

Choosing the right conference

The first step in abstract development is choosing the right conference. It’s important to identify a conference with an abstract call that fits your topic. A conference may be driven by themes or learning objectives requiring alignment of all abstracts, call for clinical innovation or research abstracts only, accept works in progress, or only accept completed projects. Considerations include the focus of the conference, the target audience, and the audience size. In addition, virtual conferences afford new opportunities, including presenting internationally. For an example of an abstract call, see 2022 ANCC Pathway to Excellence® and ANCC National Magnet® Conference abstract call.

The number of abstracts submitted for conference presentations has steadily increased, thus leading to a more competitive selection process. Before preparing an abstract, you must understand and carefully follow the conference’s instructions for submission. The ability to follow directions is crucial; not adhering to the guidelines will automatically eliminate the abstract from consideration. Only a small number of submitted abstracts are selected for conference inclusion due to limited space. Even projects of excellent quality can be rejected, but don’t let this be discouraging.

Elements of abstract submission

Once you’ve selected the conference and thoroughly read the requirements, it’s time to develop your abstract. Due to the volume of abstracts reviewed, you have minutes to make a strong impression. If the reviewers can’t grasp the story within the first few sentences or are confused on their first pass, they’ll likely reject the submission.

When composing an abstract, word choice makes a difference. Certain terms are traditionally associated with projects and methods, so interchanging words implies either carelessness or lack of knowledge, which can make the abstract questionable. Abstracts are supposed to be concise, yet informative. Using words or phrases
Types of nursing conferences

There are several types of nursing conferences, including, local, regional, state, national, and international meetings. Many professional nursing organizations offer annual conferences, and some include poster and podium presentation opportunities, as well as opportunities for first-time presenters. With the additional use of adjunctive technology, conferences have been able to expand into the virtual space, affording the opportunity for nurses to present and connect with their colleagues in another part of the country or even the world without the extra cost of travel.

that don’t add value will distract the reviewers. Avoid common pitfalls, such as excessive medical jargon, unnecessary abbreviations, and colloquialisms that may not be familiar to the reviewers.4

The most expedient and effective method of creating an abstract is to type it first in a word processing program. This allows you to easily use the required font size and cut and paste the abstract body into the submission site template. Because most abstract calls have a word or character limit, using a word processing program also helps keep track of this requirement.

Elements of abstract submission often vary depending on the type of conference and whether you’re presenting original research or evidence-based practice findings.5 The conference abstract may contain the following.

Title. A title that captures the reviewers’ interest is critical. Compose a clear and concise title that meets the conference theme to grasp the reviewers’ attention and leave a great first impression. Titles are often limited to

2022 ANCC Pathway to Excellence® and ANCC National Magnet® Conference abstract call

The 2022 ANCC Pathway to Excellence Conference will be held October 13 to 15, 2022, in Philadelphia, Pa. The conference call for abstracts opens on November 1, 2021, and closes on December 13, 2021, at 11:59 p.m. EST.

Conference goals and topic areas

The conference learning goals/outcomes are to:

• examine the positive impact of shared governance, effective leadership, and interprofessional partnerships that exemplify workplace excellence
• evaluate evidence-based practice, research, quality, and safety initiatives
• assess nurse-driven and organizational initiatives to foster a culture of health and safeguard clinician and community well-being
• demonstrate the value of lifelong learning and nurse empowerment for organizational outcomes.

Abstract submission guidelines

• All abstracts must be submitted online in alignment with provided guidelines (www.magnetpathwaycon.org).
• Abstracts must not exceed the published character limits (2,500 total character limit).
• Abstracts may be submitted for oral (podium), poster, or either presentation. Abstracts submitted for oral presentation will be considered for oral or poster presentation unless otherwise specified by the primary presenter.
• Abstracts must align with one or more conference goals and be submitted for one track only.
• The following may not be entered in the abstract system: charts, graphs, bullet points, indentations, or references.
• Files and/or videos may not be uploaded as attachments.
• Review your abstract for grammar and spelling errors before submission. Proper grammar and accuracy reflect the quality of your abstract.
• If a Pathway to Excellence (PTE) organization is presenting with a non-PTE organization or employee, the primary presenter must be the PTE employee. The PTE employee must have a primary role in the actual presentation.

Acceptance criteria

Those accepted for presentation at the conference are required to:

• respond with their intent by the designated date in the email invitation
• accept presenter guidelines in the online system
• register for the conference by the 2022 early bird deadline
• assume costs associated with full registration, travel, and accommodations for the conference
• authenticate a speaker release form and acceptance of guidelines via the Speaker Center in the online abstract system per the acceptance email
• upload the electronic presentation (oral or poster) and handouts to the online system by the date listed in the acceptance email.
Submitting the abstract

Once you’ve finished the abstract, step away from it. Then, look it over with a fresh perspective, which can help with the editing process. Make sure the language flows and is congruent throughout. Perform a careful spell check and avoid or minimize abbreviations when possible. It’s always a good idea to have multiple people read the abstract before submission. Consider asking for feedback from coauthors, a mentor, or colleagues not involved in the project. Their thoughts and feedback based on experience and knowledge bring added value to the abstract’s development.

Keep in mind the abstract writing and submission process generally takes more time than anticipated. Factor in time to address potential technical glitches with online submission. Lastly, be sure to include all necessary forms, such as biographic and contact information.2

Once you submit the abstract, a conference committee team consisting of expert reviewers will score it according to the criteria required for submission. Typically, your identity is blinded from reviewers, allowing objectivity during the scoring process. Conference abstract reviewers unfamiliar with the project will compare it against selection criteria and other abstracts to decide whether to include the presentation in the conference program. You’ll receive notification of results after the completion of the review.7

Upon acceptance of your abstract, there will be several deadlines from the conference committee that you need to meet. These are often provided in the abstract call, so read the requirements carefully. Key deadlines may include confirming acceptance to present, registering for the conference, and preparing the presentation. Many conference committees require submission of the presentation months in advance of the conference.

Knowledge sharing

Nurse leaders play a pivotal role in the dissemination of nursing practice and research. Although writing a conference abstract can be time-consuming and occasionally daunting or frustrating, it’s also rewarding, especially when you receive an acceptance notice. It’s through opportunities such as presenting at conferences that nurses contribute to the greater good of the professional community. As we work to advance the nursing profession and promote a positive practice environment, consider telling your story and sharing your knowledge with others. NM

REFERENCES


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