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Seismological Society of America:
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How to Organize a Technical Session

Calling all SSA members—it's almost time to submit a technical session proposal for the next Annual Meeting. Ready to step into the seismic spotlight and help steer the scientific conversation? With these tips from colleagues who have been there, done that, there's no need to be daunted by the process.

Choose a Session Topic

Decide what session would you like to see, advises Elizabeth Vanacore, researcher at the University of Puerto Rico at Mayagüez and co-chair of SSA's 2018 Annual Meeting.

Perhaps it's a topic that you felt did not receive enough attention at a prior meeting, offers Allison Bent, research seismologist with Natural Resources Canada and editor-in-chief of *Seismological Research Letters*.

Ask yourself, says Eric Calais of France's Ecole Normale Supérieure, "What is the key question in my field that I can gather people around? Something you and a community think is important" and "triggers interest because of its novelty."

Maybe your topic will advance the discussion in Earthquake Early Warning, strong motion and deep earth structure. It could explore a current event or the tectonics related to the meeting location. Lori Dengler, professor emeritus at Humboldt State University, usually finds that her favorite sessions "introduce new ideas or bring a sticky problem into the light of day." Whatever your idea, pursue it, says Dengler. "If something occurs to you, it's worthy of fleshing out. Bounce your ideas off of colleagues."

Create Your Session Proposal

What makes a good proposal? 2019 Annual Meeting co-chair Joan Gomberg of the U.S. Geological Survey says it "should identify a topic of interest to a critical mass of people, contain a compelling description of why a session would be useful and what it will cover, and at least a few ideas for potential presenters."

The description is "key to attracting other scientists to your session" says Vanacore, who adds that it's important to include "what types of abstracts you are looking for, and why the session is scientifically important or interesting."

Bent recommends using session descriptions from previous meetings as a guide: "Do some get your attention more than others? Do some leave you wondering what the session is really about? Borrow from the best and improve where needed."

Dengler reminds members that it's not the length but the content that counts. "A session proposal can be short, just enough to cover the topic and types of papers you are seeking be submitted," she says, adding that SSA is here to help bring your proposal across the finish line. "Once submitted, there is often a second round of adjustments. Meeting conveners will look at the proposed sessions and often find there are several related topics and may suggest combining two or three sessions into a larger one. You will be included in that discussion."

Find Speakers and Conveners

Who would you like to speak at, or convene, your session? Looking to those you know – or you've at least met – is a good first step.

"Be brave," says Vanacore. "At most meetings you meet and receive cards of other scientists who work within your specific area, so break out the rolodex and reach out." She adds that "your mentors may have contacts you do not and may be able to help you with an introductory email or phone call."

Michael Bostock, professor at the University of British Columbia and co-chair of the 2019 Annual Meeting, suggests another method to organizers: "Survey the recent literature to see who has been publishing in their target fields."

You should have at least two conveners, says Bent, and keep in mind that most of your session will be taken up by contributed talks. When reaching out to possible speakers, make it clear "whether you are asking them to give an invited talk or whether you are drawing their attention to your session in the hope that they will give a contributed talk."

Gomberg stresses that conveners "need not be famous. Most important is their ability to speak clearly and keep speakers on schedule."

Promote Your Session

Once your session has been approved, it's important to generate interest in it. "You can officially invite one or two speakers, then you target other relevant groups of people to publicize your session," says Southern California Earthquake Center's Christine Goulet, who advocates reaching out to institutions.

"Most research centers and groups have their own mailing lists – for example, if your session is on national seismic hazard maps, USGS has a mailing list for that. If it's on seismology and wave propagation, you can contact SCEC. If you don't know many people, that's a good way to publicize your topic."



At the Meeting: Tips on Timing

"Give yourself extra time before the session starts to really understand the timing system for the speakers, including asking for clarification from the meeting A/V helpers. Speakers themselves might be a little nervous about how much time they have to speak, so being able to clearly explain to them what time lights come on will make everyone feel more at ease about staying on time."—Susan Bilek, Professor of Geophysics, New Mexico Tech

"If there are a dozen or so co-authors, feel free to only introduce the speaker by name and say 'and colleagues'—especially if there is a list of co-

authors on the first slide in back of you...No authors want their 15-minutes shortened!"—David Wald, U.S. Geological Survey, Golden, Colorado

"If the speaker doesn't appear to be getting close to the end when the light turns yellow, try to get his/her attention by waving, starting to move closer or quietly saying something like 'two minutes left.'"—Natural Resources Canada's Allison Bent, who adds that if all else fails, 'you have the right to stop the talk; try to be firm but polite.'

Prepare for Challenges

Making everyone's roles and obligations clear from the start is key to any session's success. "Before the conference, decide how to split the chairing duties," says Bent. "If there are two conveners, you should both be there for the entire session. If there are more than two, decide how many of you will chair the session and who does what."

And remember that teamwork will get you through challenges along the way. Just ask Alicia Hotovec-Ellis of the U.S. Geological Survey Volcano Science Center in Menlo Park, California. She organized her first technical session last year. "Two of our four conveners (myself included) are government employees and were furloughed while abstracts were being chosen for oral or poster presentations," she says. "Thankfully, the other two stepped up and handled it when we couldn't."

While some challenges can't be foreseen, others can. Like no-shows, for example. "It's tempting to just go on to the next talk if an author doesn't show up, but try not to do so," says Bent. "Some people might be coming in specifically for the later talk and will miss it if you move it. A tried and true strategy for keeping people in the room is to open the floor to questions for any of the previous speakers or for general discussion."

And should a speaker go overtime, you can always skip the Q and A session and suggest audience members approach the speaker at a later time, she adds. And to deal with the dreaded silent Q and A session? You may want to prepare a question of your own ahead of time just in case, Bent says.

In spite of the furlough-related challenges, Hotovec-Ellis says her first session ended up running smoothly. She encourages other early-career members like herself to take the career-advancing leap.

"If you want to convene a session, don't wait for someone else to ask you to help. Take the initiative yourself," she says. "Be the one to ask your colleagues if they'd be interested in putting one together."

Proposal Deadline

In Dengler's words, it's time to "get your thoughts moving and throw your ideas into the arena!" [SSA's 2020 Annual Meeting](#) takes place 27-30 April 2020 in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Submit your technical session proposal online from **15 August until 1 October 2019**.

Washington Travel Wishes Granted

Congratulations to our 2019 Geosciences Congressional Visits Days (Geo-CVD) Travel Grant recipients: **Marlon Ramos** of University of Michigan and **Dimitri Voytan** of University of Texas, Austin.

Geo-CVD, held this year from 10-11 September, unites geoscience researchers, professionals, students, educators, engineers and executives in Washington, D.C. to raise visibility and support for the geosciences.

Interested in learning more? Visit our policy page about [Geo-CVD](#). And stay tuned for a report from our students when they return from Washington.

SSA by the Numbers

When you join SSA, you're part of a global and growing community:

2,700 members

71 countries where our members live/work

1,300+ institutions worldwide that subscribe to *BSSA* and *SRL*

50 percent of our journal authors live/work outside the U.S.

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