An Open Letter to Anyone Proposing an Event for #AWP17

Thank you for your support and interest in the 2017 AWP Conference & Bookfair in Washington, DC. In social media, our members have encouraged certain kinds of conference events, and they have wondered how events are selected. We hope to clarify here a few aspects of how AWP builds the conference programming, to address our members’ concerns.

Who Selects the Events?

The events for the conference are chosen by individuals who represent AWP’s general membership. These members serve on a city-specific subcommittee, which ranks the proposals for that city’s conference. In populating this subcommittee, we choose people who will provide the process with:

- regional representation—individuals who appreciate the accomplishments of the writers, presses, and literary organizations in the region hosting the conference;
- balance by literary genre—authors who represent the full variety of literary genres;
- diversity—individuals who embody various literary professions, aesthetics, ethnicities, subjects, interests, and specialties;
- representation of AWP’s membership generally—individuals who represent the wide range of AWP’s programs and the concerns of our teachers, students, administrators, and graduates.

Among the 20 people who are on this year’s Washington, DC 2017 Subcommittee, only 2 are board members. No AWP staff member ranks or judges any of the proposals. The 2018 Tampa Conference subcommittee will have 18 new members, with the small minority of board members providing continuity. This structure gives more AWP members an opportunity to build our conference programming.

A list of the Washington, DC 2017 Subcommittee’s members can be found on our website, https://www.awpwriter.org/about/governance_committee

How Competitive Is the Process?

As is the case with most literary magazines, we receive many submissions, and relatively few make the cut. For the 2016 Los Angeles conference, we received 1,760 proposals, and we accepted 560 of them. Even though we maxed out our available meeting space to accept as many proposals as possible, we were
only able to accept 32%. Every year there are many worthy proposals we simply do not have the space to accept.

Keep in mind the subcommittee that evaluates the proposals changes every year. The process in this regard is similar to how a guest editor works for a literary magazine, but we have, in effect, 20 guest editors to evaluate the proposals, and 17 to 18 of them change every year. The preferences of the subcommittee change annually. Over three or four years, those preferences are receptive to the teeming plurality of today’s literary interests. If your proposal is rejected, it may be worth your while to revise it and submit it again the next year.

Given the vast array of today’s literary concerns, it is unlikely that we will ever be able to create a single schedule that satisfies everyone, but we work hard to include as many voices as possible. If one year’s conference omits a certain subject, another year’s conference will surely address it. Over a period of several conferences, the programming of the AWP Conference & Bookfair offers a wonderful and unmatched reflection of today’s vast literary field. The AWP Conference & Bookfair is the most inclusive literary event in the United States.

A Few Qualities of Successful Proposals

The proposals that most often rank the highest are those that involve panelists diverse in their backgrounds, aesthetics, specialties, affiliations, and stages of their careers. The subcommittee understands these events will enable the best discussions. An event populated by five writers from the same university seems insular, and it will fare poorly. An event that demonstrates interscholastic play, inter-generational collaboration, and diversity has a far greater chance of appealing to a large audience and providing an issue with the lively analysis it deserves.

If you feel that a certain subject is underrepresented on our schedule, please submit a proposal this year. If you are concerned about that subject, chances are others are, too. Just keep in mind that our subcommittee strongly prefers proposals that reach beyond one campus or group to a greater diversity of people who also embody your concerns.

Successful proposals also observe the guidelines and modules by which we receive and review proposals. Please read the Event Proposal Handbook carefully before you prepare your proposal, https://www.awpwriter.org/awp_conference/proposal_submissions_acceptances

A Big Literary Field, a Small Nonprofit Organization

Many people come to the conference and see the grand scale of the event and they assume AWP has limitless resources at our disposal. They assume it would be easy to create a conference that addresses all literary concerns. We have increased the number of events threefold over the last decade, and the Washington, DC conference will accept more than 550 next year; but AWP remains a nonprofit organization with modest resources. Our conference is big, but contemporary literature is far bigger, of course.
It’s a wonder and a great achievement that we can hold up such a big mirror to our field each year. AWP’s conference department is made up of four people. The whole AWP staff is only made up of fifteen full-time employees, and five part-time employees. These dedicated people facilitate all of our membership services, website, publications, and conference operations in the service of 12,000 conference attendees, 800 bookfair exhibitors, and 50,000 writers and teachers worldwide. We operate with a limited staff in order to keep the costs to our members and conference attendees as low as possible. Rest assured, we’re always working hard on providing better services to help writers and literature thrive.

We look forward to seeing you in Washington, DC.

Sincerely,

Christian Teresi  
Director of Conferences

Cynthia Sherman  
Director of Exhibits 
& Associate Director of Conferences