Introduction

SUGI conferences thrive because SAS users profit from sharing knowledge of and experience with SAS Institute products. Attending a conference and learning what other people know has obvious benefits. But the conference format requires that some users invest the time and effort to organize a presentation. You have indicated an interest in that process by reading this paper. If you have thought of preparing a paper or a poster for a conference of SAS users, but don’t know how to get started or what is involved, read on. This paper is intended to demystify paper-submission, preparation and presentation.

SUGI Structure

Presentations at SUGI can be made as papers in formal lecture format or as posters.

Posters

Posters are ideal for presenting detailed code and graphical output. The one-on-one discussions with viewers that occur during the time the author attends the display allow for interchanges of ideas that can be profitable to both. If you are not comfortable speaking to large audiences, consider the poster format.

Posters consist of two presentation panels, one 45 inches square and one 45 inches by 22 inches. The boards are provided at the conference; you bring the pieces and assemble the posters there. You can prepare a version of your poster for publication in the Proceedings.

The SAS Institute Publication SUGI Paper Presentation Guidelines contains more details about posters as well as papers.

Papers

Papers at SUGI conferences consist of a prepared lecture style presentation and prose published in the Proceedings.
• Abstracts and other materials the section chair needs to confirm an invited paper are due much earlier than the deadline for contributed papers. Typically section chairs will complete their list of invited speakers for the next SUGI conference within a month or two of the end of the last SUGI conference.

To become an invited speaker you need a track record that a section chair can rely on. You can lobby to be invited if you contact a section chair at the appropriate time. Experience in public presentations outside the SUGI arena can count on your behalf, but since the section chairs take their responsibility for quality quite seriously, they normally restrict their invitations to people whose qualifications they know personally.

The best way for a new presenter to get on to the podium at SUGI is by submitting a contributed paper. This process does not begin with the application. First you must have something to contribute.

Preparing Your Paper

Identifying a Topic

The best presenters give papers about something they know from first-hand experience in a real-world situation. The actual paper then requires some additional research to cover the topic thoroughly. Your motivation to share a particular piece of knowledge will keep you focused and enthusiastic through the process.

Once you have some idea what you want to talk about:

• Do your homework: Research the Proceedings from the last several SUGI’s, as well as all the Regional conferences you can get hold of, for papers that may address your topic. If a previous paper has laid a foundation, you can build on it. It can also be worthwhile to cover the same ground again. Keep in mind that 60 percent of attendees at last year’s SUGI conference were first-timers.

• Test the waters for interest in your topic by attending papers that are similar in theme, purpose or content, and chatting with members of the audience. Note particularly people who ask questions that lead in the same direction your paper topic would go. Take the time to make contact with these questioners. Their perspective may introduce elements you hadn’t thought of, or show you where you need to go into more detail on something you thought obvious.

• Prepare for your topic to expand as you investigate it. Tying up all the loose ends can be time consuming—and may not add much text to your paper. You may have to spend hours finding out "what happens if” just to make sure you don’t need to address that area in your paper.

• Make sure you know who is going to support your paper preparation. Will your employer allow you to write the paper on company time? Research it? Can you do the test runs on company time and funds? If you are a consultant, you not only have to be willing to put in the non-billable time, you may have to plan for it in your schedule. If this means turning down paying projects, what are you going to do? This is not meant to discourage you from doing a paper. Facing these possibilities in advance increases the likelihood of a successful completion.

Submitting a Paper

The first official opportunity you have to throw your hat into the ring is the Call for Papers. For SUGI 19 in April 1994, the Call for Papers went out in June 1993 and submissions were due October 1, 1993. A submission consists of (3 copies each of) a completed application form, a 200 word abstract, and a 1,000 word working draft. The abstract is published in the conference program, to allow attendees to make decisions about what papers to attend. The working draft will not be published. The conference chair and section chairs use the draft to make decisions about whether to accept the paper and what section to place it in.

You should receive a Call for Papers if you attend a SUGI conference. It is also included in SAS Communications. If you do not receive one you can contact the SUGI coordinator at SAS Institute. The Call for Papers lists names, addresses and phone numbers of the conference and section chairs.

If you have any questions about your submission, call either the conference chair or the section chair who is most appropriate for your topic. Be sure to call well before the deadline. The conference chair and section chairs volunteer their time for these positions. Last-minute calls for help cannot all be answered in time.
Choosing a Title

Everyone knows you can’t judge a book by its cover, but the title can make or break your paper. People will look at many things in choosing whether to attend your presentation, but the title may be what catches the eye. The title should tell people what you plan to talk about. If in addition you can convey something of your approach or attitude toward your subject, so much the better. One way to decide what should be in the title of your paper is to begin composing a list of keywords to index it by. The most important 3 or 4 words you come up with should probably be in the title.

Don’t make the title too long. If it doesn’t fit in the allowed space for one of the conference publications, someone else might cut it down and lose your intended meaning.

Writing an Abstract

The purpose of the 200 word abstract is to allow conference attendees to choose among presentations. If your abstract is not detailed, people will not come to your presentation. If it is not accurate, they will walk out part way through. Considering this, it is appropriate to focus more on identifying the intended audience of your paper, who might be interested in hearing what you have to say, rather than on describing exactly what you are going to say.

Completing a Paper or Poster

Chairs mail letters of notification confirming acceptance of papers. This year the letters went out in January, about 3 months after the deadline for submissions and 2 months before the final paper was due for publication in the Proceedings.

Accepted authors automatically receive a copy of the SUGI Paper Presentation Guidelines, a publication of SAS Institute. You will find it much more useful to acquire this booklet in advance of acceptance, perhaps even before submitting your abstract and draft.

Once you have been accepted, you must make every effort to see that the paper is completed and presented at the conference. Papers and posters not presented are not included in the Proceedings.

Paper writing follows Pareto’s Law, that is, 80% of the paper takes about 20% of the effort. Count on taking four times as long to put on the finishing touches as you did to write the essence of your topic. Since this will be published for posterity with your name on it, you will find it worthwhile to do a great job. You will almost certainly have to limit the scope to prevent little digressions consuming unwarranted effort. Keep the original purpose of the paper in mind as you develop your theme.

When your paper is accepted you will be notified of the deadlines for submission of copyright transfers and camera-ready copies of your paper for publication. A copy of the copyright transfer is included with this paper so you can see the conditions for publication. These deadlines are several weeks or months before the conference. For example, for this year’s conference in April the copyright transfer was due February 1 and final copies of papers were received on March 15.

Note that camera-ready means that pictures of whatever you submit will be published. SAS Institute does not typeset or otherwise change your paper.

Review Your Code

A special note about SAS program code contained in published papers. It’s amazing how easily typos can slip in. After your paper is printed and ready for submission, type the code back in from your paper and make sure it runs as you intended. Even better, have someone else do it. This will save a lot of corrections later on.

Presenting Your Paper

Completing the written portion of a paper is only part of your task. You also have to prepare a formal lecture presenting your material to a live audience. Part of this presentation is overheads or slides: visual materials to help carry your message to the audience. The SUGI Paper Presentation Guidelines mentioned previously contains very detailed guidance as to the size and style of visual materials most likely to be effective. The error presenters make most frequently is using print that is too small. Following the suggestions made by SAS Institute will improve the quality of your presentation.

On top of preparing visual aids, you have to prepare yourself. Don’t just read your paper to your audience. Oral presentations can and should differ from the published paper. Prepare notes to speak from. Expect to have even the most salient points from your paper wiped clean from your mind by the experience of facing a large audience, or, what might be worse, rows of empty chairs.

Even when your materials and notes are prepared, you still have one more thing to do: PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE. The more you practice, the smoother your presentation will go. If you can
practice with live audiences, so much the better. Start with your company user group, graduate to your local user group, and then try your regional SUG. Each run-through will allow you to identify time problems, issues that need more explanation, and areas that can be eliminated. When you address a large audience, you must complete your presentation in the time allotted.

The most successful presenters develop a rapport with the audience. They see the presentation as an interactive experience. Look members of the audience in the eye. When you make an important point, look to see whether they understood. Repeat yourself. Ask, "Do you understand?"

Handling Questions

Welcome questions, as they indicate an interest in your topic. Don't hesitate to say you don't know an answer. If a question seems too detailed to be answered from the podium, offer to speak with the questioner after the formal presentation. Repeat questions into the microphone so that other members of the audience know what you are addressing.

After the Presentation

After the "Thank you" at the end of your presentation, some members of the audience will come up for some one-on-one conversation with you. Have some of your business cards ready to hand out to those who want to get in touch with you later. Answer the short questions where you are, but if you get into longer discussions, move off the podium so the next presenter can get ready.

Congratulate yourself on a job well done.

Final Words of Encouragement

Writing and presenting a paper or poster at SUGI requires a significant investment of time and effort. You will experience many benefits to make this worthwhile. Among them are that you will learn more about your specific topic than you knew when you started, and you will make contact with other users interested in your topic. Mutual learning opportunities make SUGI the valuable experience that it is for SAS users.

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References


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