

YMCA YOUTH AND GOVERNMENT CONA PROPOSAL WRITING GUIDE

OVERVIEW

Each CONA participant must write a proposal, except for students participating in the press program. Students are not allowed to co-author proposals. It is important to note that proposals are not voted on like legislative bills, but rather are evaluated by your fellow participants based on the following criteria:

1. National or International Importance
2. Evidence of Research
3. Feasibility
4. Preparation and Presentation
5. Originality

Unlike a state bill, which is a piece of legislation, a CONA proposal is a short essay that describes a problem and suggests a solution. Your proposal will be discussed in a series of committees as the conference progresses. Proposals that are ranked highly move on to larger committees while proposals that are poorly ranked are no longer discussed. Only a handful of proposals will make it to the final Plenary Session to be discussed by the entire conference.

Please give a lot of thought to these as you develop your proposal. The proposals that advance at CONA are often highly debatable but also original and feasible. You need to put a lot of effort into your proposal research and writing. Be creative and do not be afraid to go outside the box.

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DECIDE ON A TOPIC

CONA is debate-oriented, and you will want to write your proposal with that in mind. You may have a fantastic public policy idea but if it is universally acceptable, it will be passed over in favor of proposals that will elicit good discussion and debate. In this sense, proposals are much different than bills. Your proposal should serve as a starting place for discussion.

A CONA proposal should discuss a problem of national or international scope. Issues that are of local or state scope will not be accepted. Topics that are by law or practice within state control are generally not good topics for CONA. Examples of state-oriented topics are: criminal law, education policies, state and local taxes, and so on. **If you answer 'yes' to many or all of the following questions you probably should consider a different topic:**

1. Can your problem be successfully addressed at the local or state level?
2. Can your solution be implemented without national or international resources?
3. Is your problem localized to a particular geographic area?
4. Does your problem affect a limited number of people?
5. Does your problem involve state statutes vs. federal law?

In general, an appropriate issue for a YMCA Youth and Government bill will not be an appropriate issue for a CONA proposal. Your proposal may deal with federal Constitutional issues and may even suggest changes to the Constitution or to international treaties (withdrawal from a treaty, joining a treaty, or proposing new treaties). Other possibilities include changes to foreign policy, modifications to executive functions such as regulations or executive orders.

Your proposal should be understandable by your peers. You will be describing your problem and solution to other high school students. Try to select issues that can be readily understood by non-experts and that can be easily explained in a short amount of time. Try to select topics that you know something about. Your knowledge will show through in debate and will lead to better rankings.

Think big. Large policy initiatives are often much more debatable than small policy refinements. Successful CONA proposals catch the attendees' interest and spark vigorous debate. Make sure you are proposing a specific, tangible, and defensible proposal for action and not simply announcing an abstract goal with no specific course of action to attain the goal.

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Many CONA proposals recommend legislative action but the proposal itself doesn't need to be written in the form of legislation. Focus on the larger ideas rather than the specific implementation details.

With these things in mind, the following steps will help guide you as you select a topic.

1. Brainstorm a list of ideas related to these issues that you find interesting. Think of some issues facing society that you find interesting. It may be helpful to discuss some of these issues with friends, family, and community members to gain more perspective on them.
2. Prioritize the list from most important to least important.
3. Combine any topics that are similar in nature.
4. Determine if the topic is of national significance. If not, eliminate the topic or modify it so that it is of national significance.
5. Carefully consider whether there is a pressing need for government to take action on these issues.
6. Consider the "cutting-edgeness" of the topic. You want your proposal to catch the attention of others and generate good debate.
7. Eliminate any topics that you find insignificant or not debatable.
8. Select a topic.

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RESEARCH THE TOPIC

Now that you have selected your topic, it is time to develop it into a proposal. The bulk of your preparation is not in the proposal. For a really effective presentation, you will need to spend a lot of time and effort on research for your presentation/debate. It is important that you can make a solid argument for your proposal. It is a good idea to develop a research file in which you save information related to your topic. You should collect as much information as possible, for you never know what you might need later at CONA.

When thinking about your CONA proposal make sure you have clearly identified a problem before you focus on a solution. You should do some research regarding the problem you have identified and determine what solutions have been proposed, tried, or implemented perhaps in other countries. Your research should help you define and structure your proposed solution.

1. Create a list of the pros and cons related to your topic. Include the reasons why people feel one way or another on this issue.
2. Understand your sources. Many interest groups will present information to support their position. It is best to find direct sources for facts and statistics.
3. Gather the relevant facts, statistics, details, costs, and evidence from credible sources.
4. Research the legal facts surrounding this issue. You should review relevant documents for existing law, research pending legislation, and research other approaches to dealing with this issue.
5. Collect research for both sides of the issue, so you are prepared to uphold the merits of your proposal and refute criticisms.

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DEVELOP THE PROPOSAL STRUCTURE

Now that you have your topic and some research, it is time to develop the structure of your proposal. Answer the following questions.

1. What are you trying to accomplish with your proposal?
2. Who or what will be most affected by your proposal?
3. What are possible solutions to the problem?
4. What is the best solution? Is it the most economical, workable, feasible?
5. Is the solution constitutional?
6. What is your justification for the proposal?
7. What results do you expect because of your proposal?

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WRITE YOUR PROPOSAL

You are ready to write your proposal. Your proposal should be about one page, for reasons of clarity and conciseness. Your proposal can be longer, but you should recognize that students will be reading through hundreds of proposals at CONA. Your proposal needs to be one that they can quickly read through and gain a full understanding of what you are trying to achieve. Below are some helpful hints as you write each section of your proposal.

Title

Briefly state the basic action of your proposal. This should be one clear sentence or statement telling the reader what your proposal will do.

Major Areas to be Affected

State what people, places, or institutions your proposal will affect. Again, this should be brief – a few words to a maximum of one sentence. Do not go into how these areas will be affected, just state which areas are affected.

Justification

In paragraph form, state why there is a need for your proposal. Include any information that will make a compelling case for your issue. Include statistics, quotes, etc. – but do not overdue it. You only want to provide the basics of your justification. The bulk of your research will come out in your oral presentation and in debate. You can provide your justification in one or two short paragraphs. But remember that less is more. Carefully and completely state your justification, but when in doubt as to whether or not to include a specific item, leave it out. The points you make in the Justification section should be your most brilliant and best thought-out illustrations.

Proposal for Action

This is where you state the “nuts and bolts” of your proposal. What are the details? What people and/or institutions will take specific action on the topic? This is also the place where you list what those specific actions are. Remember that you are not writing legislation, but rather a broad proposal intended to be debated. Again, one or two well-constructed paragraphs are all that are necessary.

Results to be Expected

Simply state the results you expect to see after your proposal is put into action. This should only be two or three sentences and should be concise. State what can logically be expected but do not go too far out on a limb. Wild, “shot in the dark” predictions will reduce your proposal’s credibility.

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REVIEW YOUR PROPOSAL

You now have written a proposal. Next, you need to review your proposal to make sure it is ready to be submitted.

1. Does your proposal match well with the specified criteria used for evaluation at CONA?
2. Does your proposal fall under the jurisdiction of the federal government? Make sure your proposal deals with a federal issue, not a specific state or local issue.
3. Does your title clearly state the basic action of your proposal?
4. Does your proposal state the major areas to be affected in a concise manner?
5. Is your justification easy to understand and supported with research?
6. Is your proposal for action clear to the reader?
7. Do you state reasonable expected results?
8. Does your proposal make sense to others? You should have someone else review your proposal to make sure it reads clearly and tries to accomplish what you want.
9. Is your proposal free of grammatical and spelling errors? Do not rely solely on spell check in Microsoft Word - review it thoroughly!