

Improving Your Exhibit Synopsis July 2012

As an APS accredited judge, I have seen a lot of synopses – at least 1,000 over the past eight years or so. They have varied a great deal in style and quality. Based on my observations I want to offer some constructive comments about your exhibit synopsis.

First: Be sure you prepare a synopsis. There is no reason not to take this opportunity to tell the judges what you are doing. While you are not specifically penalized for skipping this step, a well thought-out synopsis can significantly improve how your exhibit fares in competition. My own exhibit was downgraded by a jury when I neglected to send in my title page and synopsis. That oversight meant that I gave up the opportunity to explain the treatment of my exhibit.

Second: Help the judges learn and understand your subject. Put yourself in the place of judges who are not experts in your area. What do they need to know to properly evaluate your exhibit that they can't see when they are standing in front of it? Is it a short but deeper history? An explanation of why your exhibit is "important"? A comment on your unusual presentation?

Third: Organize your synopsis presentation. An easy outline to follow is the list of judging criteria on the Uniform Exhibit Evaluation Form (UEEF). These criteria are Treatment, Importance, Knowledge, Personal Study and Research, Rarity, Condition and Presentation. Many synopses start with a short "Purpose," which often substitutes for or embellishes the exhibit's importance. Another common synopsis section is "Organization" or something similar that educates the jury about why you have chosen chronology, the alphabet or some other method.

Fourth: Provide a list of resources for the judges. This may be the weakest area in most synopses. Ask yourself "If I had one hour to learn about the material in my exhibit, what would I read?" That is where you should direct the judges, because an hour is about the amount of time they will take to study for your exhibit.

Some exhibitors provide a short list of one to four references that provide enough information so the judges can read or scan them easily. These exhibitors have included enough information that the APRL can easily locate a book or article for the judge. Recently I even received a CD from an exhibitor with reference material included on it. Increasingly synopses have also included web site addresses for scans of the exhibit, personal web sites with salient information, or links to articles related to the exhibit. These are usually very helpful.

Fifth: Devote a small section to explaining what has changed since you last showed your exhibit. This helps judges who have seen your exhibit before, and it focuses their attention so they don't overlook the changes and simply award the same medal (which the jury is not supposed to do). Your explanation need not be long, but stating that your

exhibit has been completely remounted, the treatment changed, or new items added will help the judges do their job better.

Sixth: **Make your synopsis visually appealing.** Use scans, photos, columns, whatever you can imagine to grab the judges' attention. We like that. Remember to leave white space, just as you have in your exhibit, so the synopsis isn't just densely packed words.

These suggestions will go a long way toward helping the judges prepare to view your exhibit. The better prepared they are, the more likely it is that the panel will award the right medal to your exhibit.

Now let's address some persistent problems in synopses. There are a handful,

Problem: The list of references is so vague the judges cannot access the material. A listing such as "Volume 5, Scott 2012 Catalog" is useless. Another common mistake is "various articles in the XYZ Journal from 1970 to 2010." The judges are forced to ignore this – there is no way they can anticipate what will be important to them when judging your exhibit. Judges expect specific references, preferably limited to a few articles or a single book. They need footnote quality descriptions from you, so that they can send a request to the APRL and receive the items you want them to review.

Problem: The reference material is not available to the judges. One of my least favorite that I have seen several times is "personal correspondence" with an expert or someone otherwise connected to the exhibit. One recent synopsis even listed this as the "most important" source. This was useless to the jury because it was completely inaccessible to them. Why not write an article that makes this knowledge available?

Another unavailable item is a personal reference library assembled by the exhibitor. An example is notebooks filled with articles, auction catalog pages, or other related material. While the exhibitor is rightfully pleased to have accumulated this knowledge, it is not accessible to and therefore of no use to the judges. The place to include this is in "Personal Study and Research," not in the list of references for judging.

Problem: Too many references. Listing a dozen or more short articles on various single items in an exhibit is not helpful. The judge must copy the list for the APRL, then pay for copying and mailing, and finally devote the time to read all of them. In my reference lists I include only three or four items, and I specifically indicate which is the best source for the judge to gain a general understanding of the area represented in my exhibit. Just because I have referred to 30 or 40 articles or other sources when researching postal history, or read many non-philatelic books about the political history, this is not a useful list for the judges. Keep it short, and again, consider where you would send someone if they had an hour or so to learn all they could.

Problem: Long lists of significant, important or similar items in your exhibit. You might consider mentioning that there are a few really important items, but a page-long list of "important" items in the exhibit simply causes the judges to skip to your next synopsis

topic. Judges won't appreciate that much detail, nor will they likely remember it by the time they reach the show. The judges will rely on the highlighting of significant items in the exhibit itself. Curb your enthusiasm and use the space in your synopsis for more useful information.

Problem: Listing prior awards. Many chief judges include an opening remark at the feedback forum that the jury is not responsible for "prior juries' mistakes." It is their way of saying that each panel should judge what is before them according to current APS judging standards. The fact that an exhibit has won previous medals or special awards should not affect the current jury. I have received a vermeil and a Grand for my exhibit. While disappointed by the low medal, I didn't argue. I listened to the judges' suggestions so that I could improve my exhibit. Had I told them that the exhibit had previously won a higher award they might not have spent as much time helping me improve.

Problem: Website links that don't work. Please, please test links before including them in your synopsis. Probably a third of the website addresses in the synopses I have seen don't work at all or take me to a site that requires a password or some other special access. This is not helpful, and wastes time that the judges could better use studying to evaluate your exhibit.

Problem: References not in English. If a reference is written in a foreign language it is likely not very helpful to the judges. If the jury can learn from photographs or drawings in the work, then include it in your reference list and say that's why it is there. Otherwise you should expect that the judges will not request the reference.

That covers my comments on synopses. I have probably overlooked something, so feel free to add to the list. But please make your synopsis useful to the jury so they can award you the right medal for your efforts.