

## How to Win the SEAC Student Paper Competition

By

Paul D. Welch, Chair of Student Paper Competition Committee, 2004  
Updated by Renee B. Walker, Chair 2006,  
and Richard A. Weinstein, Chair 2009

The SEAC Student Paper Competition was created in the fall of 1991, with the first Competition held at the 1992 Annual Meeting. The goal of the Competition is to encourage students to present results of their research at the Annual Meeting, with the further hope of increasing the quality of presentations. The inducement for students to compete is the First Place “Book Prize,” consisting of several hundred books with a total value in the thousands of dollars. It is the most valuable prize for student archaeology papers awarded by any organization in the country. Since 2006, there is the added incentive of a Second Place Prize consisting of lifetime membership in SEAC and a full set of the journal *Southeastern Archaeology*.

Many outstanding papers have been submitted to the Competition. The subject matter of the papers entered is as diverse as anthropological theory, zooarchaeology, archaeological survey, culture history, geoarchaeology, archaeobotany, and excavation methods. All periods of the human past in the Southeast have been represented, and theoretical stances have ranged from cultural evolutionism to agency theory to feminist anthropology to Fordian culture history to interpretivist post-modernism. In recognition of the diversity of papers submitted, the committee of three judges always includes archaeologists with a variety of analytical and chronological interests. The committee also strives to draw its members from a number of different institutions, including colleges and universities, cultural resource management firms, and museums.

Despite the high quality of many of the submitted papers, judges over the years have voiced several recurring concerns. A complaint heard in some years is that there aren't enough entries in the Competition. The number of entries annually has ranged from 6 to 14. In most years there are literally dozens of papers that are presented by students but not entered in the Competition. Some of those papers have been outstanding and would have been serious contenders had they been entered. You cannot win if you do not enter.

Another concern of past judges is that some entrants appear not to understand one of the rules of the Competition, which is that the written submissions have to be substantially the same papers that are presented at the Meeting. A rule of thumb is that it takes 2 minutes to read aloud one page of double-spaced text, so a 20-minute presentation should be around 10 pages in length double-spaced. At times, entries have been up to 25 or 30 pages in length. A paper submission that is 30 pages of double-spaced text is clearly substantially different from the paper that actually will be presented. Because of this, the Committee will adhere to a strict policy of paper length. No paper will be reviewed if it contains more than 10 pages of double-spaced text. Additional tables, figures, and references are welcome, but must be submitted on separate pages and not interspersed among the text. The number of pages of tables, figures and references will not be counted in the total 10-page limit. Your written submission does not have to be exactly the same as the words you pronounce aloud at the meeting, but the judges need to see that the substance of your paper can be delivered aloud in 20 minutes. (Incidentally, we do check to make sure that the winning paper as delivered is substantially the same as the written version.) A lengthy paper may well be suitable for publication in *Southeastern Archaeology*, but unsuitable as a meeting presentation.

Related to the foregoing is a misguided concern that is sometimes heard from students, i.e., that papers must be M.A. or Ph.D. theses in order to have a chance at winning. Many excellent theses cannot be presented coherently and convincingly in 20 minutes. A good meeting paper addresses an issue that can be adequately explained, and for which relevant data can be adduced and persuasive conclusions drawn, in 20 minutes. A good meeting paper says, “here’s the problem, here’s the data, here’s the solution,” rather than “it’s a complex problem and I don’t have the time to show you the data, so you’ll have to trust me that this is the appropriate conclusion.” The meeting papers that impress people most are ones which leave the audience satisfied that a particular issue has been addressed convincingly, rather than leaving the audience wondering whether the argument will really hold up when the longer, written version is scrutinized.

Judges first evaluate the written paper submissions, but it is a mistake to assume that the actual presentation doesn’t matter. In some years, two or three written submissions were so closely tied in quality that the winner was not determined until the judges had actually heard the papers presented at the meeting. (Unfortunately, this often isn’t possible, as some papers are not presented until Saturday morning, following the award presentations at the Business Meeting on Friday evening.) Useful tips on making presentations and planning slides are posted on the SEAC Student website at <http://www.seacstudentweb.org/resources.php?page=present>.

Instructions for submitting your paper in the Competition are posted on the web at: <http://www.southeasternarchaeology.org/bookprize.html>. Submit three (3) double-spaced copies (with figures, tables, and references, as necessary) of your paper to the Chair of the judging committee by the date specified in that year’s announcement (usually around Sept. 20). In effect, this means you have to prepare the paper in the spring semester, or at the latest in the summer. You can’t enter the Competition if you put off writing the paper until the week before the Annual Meeting.

So, how do you win the SEAC Student Paper Competition? First, your paper topic should focus on an interesting/important issue or question that can be coherently explained, and for which relevant data can be presented and logical conclusions drawn, all in a 20-minute time slot. Second, you have to prepare your paper at least two months before the Annual Meeting. Third, you have to follow the rules. Fourth, **you have to enter.**