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# Putting Your Best Foot Forward: Preparing Dossiers for Applications, Awards, and Candidacies

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Frank W. Medley, Jr.

## Introduction

In the teaching profession there are numerous professional awards, promotions, and recognitions made each year to publicize, reward, and honor excellence in the classroom and service to the profession. In many instances, a peer review committee studies the applications and nominations and selects or recommends the recipient of the award. The author of this article has served on these committees at the regional and national levels, and has also been the recipient of awards and honors at both levels. It should be noted that this is not intended to be an empirically based scholarly article. Instead, the author draws on his experience to describe and discuss some of the points that one should consider when preparing a dossier for submission to a professional organization or other group that uses a selection procedure to determine the recipient of the honor or award.

In order to add breadth and depth to the discussion, a brief description of four different awards — three regional and one national — is first presented, and the criteria are then discussed in more general terms as the article progresses. The awards that serve as the basis for discussion are the Central States Conference Founders Award, the Teacher of Excellence Award sponsored by the Southern Conference on Language Teaching, the Excellence in Teaching Award from the Southwest Conference on Language Teaching, and the Teacher of the Year Award sponsored by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages.

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## Reviewing the Award Criteria

Since different awards usually have different criteria, the applicant should prepare his or her dossier with careful attention to what the selection committee expects to find in the portfolio. Thus, the first task of the applicant is to become informed about the criteria for the award and details of the application process. Oftentimes, this

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information can be found on the official Website of the organization sponsoring the award, or is available upon request. Most regional foreign language professional organizations sponsor awards for which teachers can apply or submit nominations. The Central States Conference (CSC) [<http://www.centralstates.cc/>] sponsors the Simon Award and a Founders Award. The Northeast Conference (NECTFL) [<http://www.nectfl.org>] sponsors the Brooks Award, the Dodge Award, the Freeman Award, The Northeast Conference Service Award, and the Mead Fellowships. The Pacific Northwest Conference for Languages (PNCFL) [<http://babel.uoregon.edu/pncfl/>] has no details regarding awards or honors other than some funding for state associations to invite speakers to their meetings. The Southern Conference on Language Teaching (SCOLT) [<http://www.valdosta.edu/scolt/>] sponsors a Friend of Foreign Languages Award and Teacher of Excellence Awards, as well as a Founders Award. The Southwest Conference on Language Teaching (SWCOLT) [<http://www.swcolt.org>] sponsors a Teacher of the Year Award, Excellence in Teaching Awards, and a Friend of the Profession Award, in addition to numerous language-specific scholarships.

At the national level, the language-specific associations also sponsor awards, grants, and scholarships. As examples, the American Association of Teachers of French (AATF) [<http://www.frenchteachers.org/>] lists five grants and awards on its Website, the American Association of Teachers of German (AATG) [<http://www.aatg.org>] lists five awards in addition to grants and scholarships the organization administers, and the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese (AATSP) [<http://www.aatsp.org>] has six awards listed on its Website. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) [<http://www.actfl.org>] sponsors or co-sponsors nine different awards, including the newly established ACTFL National Language Teacher of the Year Award.

*The Central States Conference Founders Award* is conferred at the discretion of the Conference on an individual or group from within the language teaching profession who exemplify the following qualifications:

- excellence in the promotion of language learning and international studies;
- leadership in the language teaching profession as exemplified by the founders of the Central States Conference;
- strong ties with one or more of the seventeen Central States;
- professional dedication and enthusiasm.

Although either a group or an individual can be a recipient of this award, this discussion will focus only on the individual nomination in order to maintain consistency for purposes of comparison across award criteria. According to the organization's Website:

Nominations of an individual should include the candidate's present position and role in the foreign language profession, the ways in which the candidate meets the specific criteria for the award, the capacity in which the nominator has known the candidate, the candidate's current *curriculum vitae*, and support documentation that bears direct relevance to the nomination. (<http://www.centralstates.cc/FA2003.html>)

Nominations for the award must be submitted by members of the Central States Conference Advisory Council, and support documentation should not exceed ten pages. The Conference apparently does not require a specific cover sheet, nor are there any other details on the Website regarding the content or organization of the dossier.

*The Teacher of Excellence Award* sponsored by the Southern Conference on Language Teaching has specific requirements for eligible applicants, as well as for the nomination packet. The dossier to be submitted must include the following:

- a cover sheet, which can be downloaded from the SCOLT website;
- a letter of nomination that is to include the nominee's name, address, position, role in the foreign language profession and in SCOLT conferences, the capacity in which the nominator has known the candidate, and detailed evidence of the ways in which the candidate meets the criteria for the award (not to exceed two pages);
- a statement from the nominee of acceptance of the nomination and willingness, if selected, to accept the award in person as the guest of the Conference at the Awards Luncheon during the annual meeting (not to exceed one page);
- a c.v./résumé that includes the nominee's educational background, employment, professional memberships/activities (especially in SCOLT), and selected honors; (not to exceed five pages);
- three letters of support of the nomination in any combination from principal or dean, local or state supervisor; a department chair, colleagues, or students/former students is acceptable.
  - on letterhead stationery when applicable,
  - must be originals: cannot be faxed, photocopied, or e-mailed,
  - are not to exceed one page each.

Finally, the instructions stipulate that there is to be only one typed original copy of all documentation, only paper-clipped together, no staples, no plastic covers, submitted in a sealed envelope. There is also a date by which the packet must be postmarked.

*The Excellence in Teaching Award* from the Southwest Conference on Language Teaching is designed to recognize outstanding teachers of Languages Other Than English. One individual each may be recognized at the elementary, secondary, and postsecondary levels. Candidate eligibility and procedures for nominating a recipient are published on the organization's Website.

As with some other regional awards, only members of the SWCOLT Advisory Council may make nominations, and new Council members may join at the time the nomination is made. The nominating dossier should contain the following:

- an awards cover sheet;
- a nominating cover letter that addresses the listed criteria and clearly explains the rationale for the nomination;
- a brief *curriculum vitae* of the candidate (from one to three pages maximum) summarizing educational background, teaching experience, membership in language organizations, service to the profession, recent conference presentations, publications, awards, and other teaching achievements;

- two additional letters supporting the nomination — one from an administrator and another from a student;
- the nominating dossier, including cover sheet, not to exceed seven pages;
- membership in SWCOLT or joining at the time of the application.

An original and three copies of the nomination dossier are to be submitted by the deadline established by the Conference.

*The Teacher of the Year Award*, co-sponsored by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages and McDougal Littell, a division of Houghton Mifflin Company, “is intended to elevate the status of our profession at the state, regional, and national levels by creating opportunities for recognizing the most accomplished members of our profession” (<http://www.actfl.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=3500>).

This award emerged from the New Visions in Action initiative of the National K-12 Foreign Language Resource Center at Iowa State University [<http://nflrc.iastate.edu/homepage.html>]. Procedures for selection were piloted at the annual meeting of the Southwest Conference on Language Teaching in 2004. Nominations for the 2005 award have been submitted, and nominations for the 2006 award were due from the regional associations by January 9, 2006. Procedurally, all nominations must come from one of the five regional foreign language conferences in the nation: the Central States Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (CSC); the Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (NECTFL); the Pacific Northwest Council for Languages (PNCFL); the Southern Conference on Language Teaching (SCOLT); and the Southwest Conference on Language Teaching (SWCOLT).

In response to recommendations from the regional associations, ACTFL has revised the criteria and guidelines for 2006, and they are now available online at <http://www.actfl.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=3500>. The process has been designed so that state, regional, and national professional organizations can be involved in publicizing and promoting the activities of world language teachers. Nominations can be submitted by state language organizations to the regional association for that state. In the event a state is included in two regional organizations, only one nomination can be submitted. Once the regional organization has determined a deadline for submission and that deadline has arrived, all portfolios will be reviewed and one may be selected for submission to ACTFL.

In order to be nominated for the Teacher of the Year Award, the nominee and/or her or his shepherd must assemble a portfolio of no more than 50 pages. The document is to include the following elements:

- a cover page, including the nomination form, which an officer of the state foreign language association’s Board of Directors, or other person designated by the sponsoring state organization, must complete and sign;
- letters of recommendation: one submitted by each of the following individuals:
  - a. a letter of nomination and recommendation from a representative of the state foreign language association or sponsoring organization;
  - b. a letter of recommendation from a professional colleague;
  - c. a letter of recommendation from a supervisor;

d. a letter of recommendation from a parent of a student in the teacher's program or from a student;

- *Curriculum Vitae*: a comprehensive *curriculum vitae* of no more than five pages in length;
- lesson plan demonstrating classroom competency: a detailed lesson plan and a videotape or DVD showing a teaching sample of no more than 20 continuous instructional minutes from that lesson plan demonstrating target language communication in the classroom and a variety of instructional strategies; in addition, a description and reflection on the candidate's teaching in response to the topics outlined in the section on classroom competency;
- demonstration of skill in communication: a 500-word first-person statement on the value of learning language and culture;
- Public Relations Contact Information: a one-page contact information sheet indicating the names and addresses of administrators, local press, professional affiliations, etc., who may be contacted by the committee to publicize the candidate's accomplishments;
- agreement to serve as an ACTFL-sponsored *Ambassador for Foreign Languages*: a statement indicating the candidate's willingness to act as an ambassador for foreign languages over the course of the year.

As the preceding examples illustrate, each of these professional honors and awards has its own established criteria and, in many instances, specific guidelines for just how the application or nomination is to be organized. Because the criteria and selection process of the ACTFL Teacher of the Year Award is the most detailed and comprehensive, and because it subsumes all of the criteria listed in the other awards, it is used here to illustrate the topics discussed.

## **Assembling a Professional Portfolio**

With the awards and many other forms of professional recognition that use a nomination and review process, there are a number of ways that applicants can strengthen their portfolios. Regardless of whether a candidate is selected by a professional group or is self-nominated, the candidate is instrumental in helping prepare the dossier (e.g., providing an up-to-date c.v., suggesting reviewers who know his or her work), and it is usually the responsibility of the candidate to prepare the dossier to be submitted. Some regional associations assign a shepherd to aid in the preparation of the dossier, while in other groups it may be the sole responsibility of the nominee. Assuming that you are a nominee at some point, or that you nominate someone, the following guidelines will help in the preparation of the nomination materials. Again, while the Teacher of the Year criteria are used here, much of what is

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recommended applies equally to other applications and nominations.

*Organization.* Organize your portfolio or application packet in the same sequence as the requirements for the award are listed. When the panel is reviewing dossiers, they should not have to search for the information requested. In some instances, the panel will use a scoring rubric that includes specific weighting for each criterion. If the expected information is not in the proper sequence it may be overlooked or missed, and fewer points may be assigned.

*Letters of Recommendation.* When you ask someone to write a recommendation letter, give the writer as specific an idea as possible of what reviewers will be looking for. Although your referees may know you quite well, they may not know the criteria that the selection panel considers important, thus they will not know what aspects of your performance need to be emphasized in their letters. By including a copy of the selection criteria with your request for a letter, you make it much easier for your referee to prepare a letter that will highlight the things that the panel considers most important. As an illustration, a person requesting a letter of recommendation for the ACTFL Teacher of the Year award might point out to referees that the selection committee will be looking for (among other things) evidence of your performance in the following areas:

- Target language communication in the classroom
- Instructional strategies used in the classroom
- Student cultural exposure
- Connecting to the community
- Evidence of professional growth
- Active involvement in professional organizations
- Variety of professional leadership experience

Nominees for other awards would draw from the criteria of the award for which they are being nominated in order to apprise their reviewers of the information necessary to tailor their letters to the specific interests of the selection committee.

In addition, give the reviewers a deadline and do not hesitate to send them gentle reminders of these dates. Be sure to include a copy of the candidate's up-to-date c.v. and let the reviewer know if he or she is to write a general letter about the candidate or concentrate on a particular area (service to the profession, teaching, etc.). It is also useful to let the letter writer know to whom the letter should be addressed (e.g., the person shepherding the nomination or the chair of the committee).

*Narrative Statements.* When you are asked to prepare a narrative statement, it is critically important that this statement be written in such a way that the various components of the application packet are connected. For example, for the ACTFL award, your narrative should establish a clear relationship between the National Standards, your lesson plan, the videotape, and your reflection statement, all of which you are

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expected to provide as a part of the portfolio. Although you undoubtedly have a clear idea of how everything comes together to form a cohesive learning experience for your students, this may not be so obvious to the evaluators. So, describe the components of the lesson, and point out, for example, how the videotape illustrates what you include in your lesson plan and how your reflection will result in your decision to make changes or otherwise modify the lesson for future classes. In particular, your reflection statement should show that you have learned something yourself from the teaching experience.

In your written narrative, choose your words carefully and correctly (e.g., *visual aid* — not *visual aide*). As language professionals, we are intensely aware of the importance of using vocabulary that is both correct and precise, and of correct spelling and punctuation. However, even someone who knows better can let errors slip. Most spell-checking programs do not search for correct usage of words such as *to*, *too*, *two*. If the word is spelled correctly it is accepted, whether it is the correct word or not. For this reason, it is advisable to ask a colleague or other individual to proofread to make sure that the document says what you want it to say! Only careful proofreading will catch those kinds of errors, and they should be caught before the final draft of your application is submitted.

*Lesson Plans.* In some instances, such as for the ACTFL award, you must include a *detailed* lesson plan and a videotape or DVD. The videotape/DVD should show 20 *continuous* instructional minutes (rather than unconnected segments totaling 20 minutes). That being the case, it is important to include a short discussion or narrative on the plan and guidelines about its preparation. This would include items like the goal of the lesson, the standards that the lesson illustrates, clearly explained activities (indicating whether they are individual, small group, large group, or entire class), and a short summary of the lesson that precedes and the lesson that follows the one being illustrated so that committee members get a sense of sequencing, topics and vocabulary covered, the appropriateness of the textbook and ancillary materials and realia used, etc.

Do not include photocopies of copyrighted materials in your lesson plans unless you have permission from the publisher to do so. If, for example, your sample lesson is based on a reading selection, you should contact the copyright holder and request permission to use the material. Most publishers are quick to give permission, since this amounts to free publicity for their products, and you can usually obtain the permission with nothing more than an e-mail.

*Specified Requirements and Limitations.* Adhere strictly to the limitations and requirements stipulated in the application. For the ACTFL award, for example,

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that means that the complete application is to be no more than 50 pages, total. Some of the other awards described above do not place limitations on the full dossier, but do specify numbers of pages for various components of the submission. The ACTFL award also asks for a 500-word first-person statement. To avoid having to compromise the quality of your application because you are rushed for time, begin the preparation of your portfolio early and plan to submit it early to allow for unexpected delays.

While criteria for retention, promotion, and tenure dossiers do not generally have page limitations imposed, care should be taken to assure that all materials are pertinent to the purpose of the file, and will not be perceived as extraneous “padding” by the reviewers.

*Preparation of a Video Component.* If a video component is required as a part of the application process, plan carefully before you make the recording. Can a tripod be used? Where should the camera be located? Who will operate it? Limit panning (moving the video recorder horizontally to provide a panoramic view of the entire class) and zooming (changing the camera focus toward or away from a subject) unless these techniques are essential to illustrate what is going on in the activity. When students shoot videotapes, the focus may be more on their friends than on the kinds of things that you want to be illustrated. Let the camera operator know what should be included, and emphasize that too much panning and zooming can be distracting to the viewer. You will need to have footage of what you are doing as the teacher, as well as of what the students are doing.

Do a dry run of a different class session and critique it with the videographer. Let the person running the camera know what you want, and then tape another class. Do this until the person running the camera has a clear idea of what to do (and what not to do) during the filming process. Again, this should be done before you videotape the class for inclusion in the video so that the real-time segment will give you the desired results.

As mentioned above, placement of the camera is very important. In a number of videos that this author has reviewed, there have been too many views of teachers’ backsides and not enough sustained focus on group interactions. The goal is for the video to show a fair representation of the entire class, not just a selected few students. This can only be done if the camera is placed so that the entire room can be included in the shots.

Since the video may also have an audio component, you should attend to the quality of the audio. This may necessitate the use of multiple microphones or movement of the camera so that it is close enough to pick up the voices of the speakers. In this respect, the quality of the equipment used to make the video becomes a factor. If your

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school does not have the quality equipment needed, perhaps another school in the district would have some that would do a better job of recording both the video and audio components.

*Curriculum Vitae.* Seven items are required for the portfolio that accompanies the ACTFL nomination: Cover page; Letters of recommendation; *Curriculum vitae*; Classroom competency; Communication skills; Public relations contact information; and Agreement to serve as an ACTFL-sponsored Ambassador for Foreign Languages. Of these, the category that many teachers find most problematic is the preparation of the *curriculum vitae* (c.v.), or academic résumé. A *curriculum vitae* should be well organized and illustrative of your professional preparation, growth, participation, and leadership experience. As you prepare it, keep in mind that it should encapsulate your professional career succinctly yet completely. Depending on your years of experience, you may prefer to limit inclusion in some categories to the past ten years or so. One mistake that is often made by teachers is to attempt to follow a business model in preparing the c.v. Unfortunately, some of the recommendations found in handbooks that address the business résumé do not work well in an academic context. As an illustration, many business guides encourage you to limit your document to one or two pages, which is certainly not the case for academic *curriculum vitae*.

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There are a number of different formats that one can use to prepare an academic résumé, and the decision of which is best depends upon the honor or award for which the document is being prepared. Below is one format that would be appropriate for the ACTFL Teacher of the Year award. As a suggestion, if you have no entry for a particular category, it is better not to include that category at all. Similarly, if there is a category that you need to add, do not hesitate to do so. Again, the purpose of the c.v. is to give the reader a clear idea of your professional preparation and accomplishments.

**Your Name:** This should appear at the top of your dossier, and many people prefer to center it. It is up to you how you format your document. Do not clutter the document with a variety of fonts or with information that is extraneous to your purposes.

**Contact Address:** Your contact address should include mailing, e-mail, and telephone. You may, or may not, want to include your home address. It is most important to include it as a contact address when school is not in session. If you will be out of the country for an extended period during the time you are a nominee, you should provide an e-mail address or other way in which you can be reached, should the selection committee need to do so.

**Education:** List from most recent. Specify degrees earned and major areas of study, as well as institutions awarding the degrees and the dates the degrees were awarded.

Teacher Certification/Licensure: List here the certificates/licenses you hold, and whether they are permanent or provisional, if applicable.

Teaching Experience: Again, begin with current (or most recent) employment. There should be no unexplained breaks in employment between the date of graduation and the current job.

Professional Development: This section gives you a place to include significant professional development seminars or workshops that have enhanced your skills or expanded your knowledge base. You may want to include categories for major conferences attended (with year) and any presentations you have made, as well as study abroad experience, both as a participant and as a director.

Professional Affiliations: The emphasis here is on “professional.” Being a member of the Board of Directors of a food cooperative or a homeowners association, for example, is usually not pertinent to your professional development. If it is (for example, if you had budgeting and finance responsibilities that required special skills), explain the connection to your teaching or other area of expertise. If you have held office or served as a delegate to a professional assembly, these activities should be noted either here or in another section.

Publications: When the c.v. is being developed for a college or university-level award, it is important to set aside a separate section for publications. Depending on your productivity, this category may be organized into several sub-sections: Books, Refereed Articles and Chapters, Invited Articles and Chapters, Book Reviews, Electronic Publications, Dictionary and Encyclopedic Entries, and so on.

Another section for a postsecondary c.v. might be Professional Presentations, Seminars, Workshops, and Consultancies. In determining the best way to organize and format this part of your résumé, keep in mind that your purpose is to make it easier for the reviewer to develop a clear and complete idea of your professional activities.

Other Professional Activities: If you do not include a Publications section, you can list any publications you might have here. In addition, you will want to include your service on visitation or accreditation teams, local, state, regional, and national committee work, etc. The decision of what to include here is again determined by the quantity and scope of your professional activities. In particular, it is important to include enough information on the activities to let the reader know what you have done. Often it is not enough simply to report the name of a committee, since the name may not reflect the nature and extent of your involvement. Provide a brief description of your activities with the group.

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*“Techniques that  
engage learners  
in visual thinking  
involve pattern  
recognition...”*

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Grants, Honors and Awards: These may be internal or external to the institution in which you work, and may be local, state, national, and international in scope. Provide a brief description of what the awards or honors are for if the name of the award does not make it clear.

Community Service: This section could include service related to the professional expertise of the candidate: volunteer translator, bilingual volunteer at a neighborhood clinic, conversation partner, etc.

## Summary and Conclusion

The manner in which you present your credentials in the portfolio that you submit for an honor or award has considerable influence on the selection committee. There should be a feeling on the part of the reviewers that they have a clear picture of your performance and accomplishments, and that you have not padded the document with extraneous information. It should be easy for the reviewers to follow the rubrics for evaluating your dossier, and they should not have to search for information that is not in the right order. Reference letters should be to the point, and should focus on the criteria for which the recipient is to be evaluated. If a video is required, it should be carefully prepared and there should be a clear connection between the video component and other parts of your dossier. Vocabulary, grammar, and spelling should be precise and accurate, and should convey the message intended. In other words, in preparing a dossier for professional recognition, your first step is to put your best foot forward.

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