

Preparing an Effective Poster

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The audience at a poster session is distractible and mobile. Your job in preparing your poster is to grab and keep their attention so that they will stay and take in your message. One study revealed that you have 11 seconds to grab a viewer's attention. Whether they stay or not will depend both on the attractiveness of your attention-getter, and on how daunting the rest of the poster appears at first glance. The most effective posters provide viewers with an easily digested summary – the essence of the project. Sentences and paragraphs should be short, and type should be large. For viewers who want more information, the poster should provide an entry point to further discussion with the author about the project and the results.

Keys to a successful poster

- **Know who your audience is!** If viewers are experts in your field, by all means target your poster to them. But if the audience is a general one, you will need to make a special effort to frame your question and results in an understandable and interesting way.
- **Be brief!** Distill it down...down... down... to the very essence of your project.
- **Use figures and graphics where possible.** Graphics are good attention-getters. But remember, the golden rule of figures (that they MUST be understandable without reference to accompanying text) applies doubly to posters.
- **Layout is important!** Because text is limited, layout is used to convey the logical structure of your argument. Use columns, boxes, arrows, bulleted lists, etc., to draw your viewer forward through your presentation. Be creative and make the viewing experience intellectually and esthetically satisfying.

Some of the material above is modified from "Poster hints and suggestions"

http://www.units.muohio.edu/oars/undergrad_research/ur_forum/posterhints.php

Reasons why posters fail

- **Too much text.** Keep each text block to just a few sentences. Large font size will be readable from far away and will help to keep you from using too many words.
- **Inappropriate structure.** Many people unthinkingly format their posters like a scientific journal article. Preparing a poster is a very different task. Your goal is to edit your text to concise, take-home messages, and to keep the logical strands intact. Scientific papers put methods, results, and conclusions into separate sections, but on a poster you should keep the information about a single experiment together, showing how it addresses and answers a particular question.
- **Unclear structure.** If you leave out key elements such as objectives, approach, or conclusions, people who are not insiders on your subject will not understand what your goal was or why it is interesting.
- **Poor figures.** Some figures are real puzzles, with incomprehensible legends, secret codes, small lettering, cryptic captions, etc. Many spreadsheet and data programs do not produce "reader

friendly” graphics (see figures on final page), so you will need to budget extra time to customize your figures so that they are self-explanatory.

- **Information overload.** Most presenters try to do and say too much in one poster. Yes, your research may have yielded many subtle and intertwined results, BUT you will have to settle for one, two, or at most three take-home messages to convey on your poster.
- **Presenter not present.** Remember, the poster is just half of the presentation – **you** are the other half! Be there, so that those viewers who do find your work interesting will be able to engage you in discussion. Remember, poster sessions are interactive - a truly successful poster is an opportunity for the presenter to gain new knowledge and ideas.

Material in this section is modified from “How to make a successful poster”
(<http://www.efcats.org/pages/presentation/poster.html>)

Sweating the details – some specific advice

- **Find your message.** Before you begin, try to formulate the essence of what you want to present in a single sentence. This exact sentence probably won’t appear on the poster itself, but it should be your guiding light in deciding what to include, and where – and your title and conclusions should be derived directly from this sentence.
- **Title.** Your poster should include a banner title in a large (e.g. 90 pt.), sans-serif font. Below this, put the author(s) name(s) and their institutional affiliation(s) in a slightly smaller font.
- **Body text** should use a serif font readable at a distance of at least 4 feet (16-18 pt. or 5-6 mm).
- **Introduction.** Write a few sentences that identify the problem you address, what is currently known about it (watch out for getting long-winded here!), and your approach to investigating it. Consider using a bulleted list rather than a text block.
- **Method.** This section may not be necessary for a general audience if you have specified your approach in the Introduction. For a specialized audience, the Method section is often included in smaller font so that those who only want the big picture can skip it.
- **Results.** Select the most pertinent results that support your message (above). Remove everything that is not absolutely necessary: avoid clutter. Think about the most attractive way to present the data in figures. Avoid tables if at all possible. Each illustration should have a headline title providing a take-home message with a more detailed caption below.
- **Conclusion.** Write the conclusion(s) in short, clear statements, preferably as a list.
- **Attention-getters.** An attractive title is important, but it must be supplemented by attractive graphics. There is no reason why all of your illustrations need to be the same size. Consider enlarging one (or a flow diagram, model, etc. that is the focus of your message) and placing it centrally to attract viewers. You will still need to pay attention to logical flow, directing the viewer’s attention (once you’ve captured it) up to and through this central illustration to your conclusions.
- **Layout.** Make a scale mock-up of your poster using scaled post-it notes on a sheet of graph paper. You can rearrange and re-size these till it looks right. The final product can be produced either by printing the text and illustration blocks and pasting them up on a poster board, or by printing from a computer layout program such as Powerpoint. (But remember if you print your poster that you will still need to attach it to a rigid support like posterboard for the poster session.)

- **Background.** Be careful with colored backgrounds (they can distract from your figures), and avoid using patterns (very distracting.) Usually, plain white is best. **Do** use color in your figures in ways that enhance your message.
- **Get feedback!** Ask your advisor and/or friends to comment on a draft version. Give yourself a break and review everything with a critical eye. **Listen** if someone says it's too complicated – most first-time presenters try to cram far too much into their posters.

Material in this section is modified from “How to make a successful poster” (<http://www.efcats.org/pages/presentation/poster.html>) and “Poster Design and Typography” (<http://ib.berkeley.edu/bioaape/design.type.html>)

Some useful web sites

<http://www.tss.uoguelph.ca/lhci/TGuides/EPD/index.html>

A must-visit site. Provides a well-organized and complete tutorial that walks you through all the steps of poster-making, from audience analysis and finding your key message, through the nitty-gritty of graphics, text, and background choices.

<http://ublib.buffalo.edu/libraries/asl/guides/bio/posters.html>

This site from the State University of New York at Buffalo includes a huge compendium of links to other sites, including sample posters.

<http://www.swarthmore.edu/NatSci/cpurrin1/posteradvice.htm>

Swarthmore's site helps you to think about your audience, gives advice on what to put in each section of the poster, lists numerous practical tips, and offers a Powerpoint template to download.

<http://www.efcats.org/pages/presentation/poster.html>

This site from a professional chemists' society helps you to think creatively about the structure of your presentation and has some sample posters you can view.

A PDF version of “How to give successful oral and poster presentations” by J.W. Niemantsverdriet, Eindhoven University of Technology, The Netherlands, can be downloaded free of charge from the website of the European Federation of Catalysis Societies www.efcats.org

<http://www.ce.umn.edu/~smith/supplements/poster/guide.htm>

A "poster minicourse", including a detailed step-by-step construction checklist covering fonts, alignment, adhesives for paste-up, etc.