

HOW TO MAKE POSTER PRESENTATIONS

Get inspired by the next suggestions:

Purpose

Some people have strong memories of putting up posters on the wall in their primary school. A few think that in asking you to put up a poster of your own making we are treating you as primary school children. This is not so. Posters are an international method of communication. The primary schools have got it right in recognising that posters can be colourful, interesting, memorable and fun to make. Scientific posters are informative, too. Put up at meetings they let you advertise your interests to a substantial number of people. They also let you communicate in more detail to a smaller number of particularly interested people who are prepared to spend time absorbing the finer points of your message. This more detailed exchange takes place in a small group atmosphere where feedback to you, the poster maker, can flow freely. Scientific work these days is usually carried out in teams. One reason for the popularity of posters is that they allow several members of the team to contribute explicitly to the presentation, thereby reinforcing the team aspect of the work. These days, most presentations at scientific meetings are poster presentations.

On making good posters

There is no set of rules you can apply that will automatically produce a good poster. Making a good poster is a creative experience. Our guidelines are based on many years of looking at posters at trade stands and reading scientific posters displayed at a wide variety of meetings, and many years spent making such posters. With some attention to the guidance we give, you should be able to do better than the average conference presentation.

Begin at the end. What is the purpose of the poster? The advanced technical conference poster aims at presenting information on a quite specific topic and coming to some conclusions. A practising scientist is likely to present work being planned, work in progress, or work just finished. Undergraduate posters are more likely to be a summary of a particular specialist area, or perhaps a biographical poster. Hence:

First general guideline: decide on your conclusion and build the poster around that.

Scientific posters must have a technical content of some substance. However, you should take another leaf out of the advertisers' book and use short, direct sentences to tell your story. Don't make up the text as if you were delivering a learned talk on the radio. Remember to take account of the audience you're addressing, namely people

who don't know the special jargon of the subject but can be assumed to have a general scientific education. You are the expert of the moment, not the audience. Most importantly, do tell a story. Writing a poster should be like writing a very short story, with introduction, content and, hopefully, a punchy conclusion. The poster should be self-sufficient. Anyone wanting further information can talk with you at the poster session, take a hand-out you might have (at a conference, not at your poster session, please) or follow up a reference you may give on the poster directing them to an article or, perhaps, a web page. Hence:

Second general guideline: make clarity of message top priority.

Advertisers are in the business of trying to create a single, lasting message by means of a poster. You'd really quite like to do that too. Your poster will not be very successful if the sight of the poster next door makes the on-looker completely forget about yours. The advertiser's technique is to rely 95% on visual impact and keep the word count very short. Too many conference posters have poor visual impact. In a conference poster session there may be 200 posters competing for attention in the afternoon. If your display has little visual impact, it is likely that the participants will have forgotten about you and your work by the end of the afternoon, good and painstaking though it was. A few already in the field will have stopped to read the detail, but the rest won't. In technical meetings, where you may be trying to sell your ideas to potential sponsors or buyers, this is not what you want. Hence:

Third general guideline: make visual impact a high priority.

A 'scientific' poster tries to convey much more than a slogan. Nonetheless, participants at a poster session will be suffering from word overload. What are they going to read first? The title. Make sure it is bold and clear, and the authors' names equally visible. In this day and age, specialist knowledge of the kind you are assembling on your poster is power, money and your ticket to continued employment. Your name will be the most important two or three words on the whole poster. Get used to associating your name with the provision of high quality, thoughtfully interpreted information. A poster is an advert that you have this expertise. Make sure your name is prominent. Hence:

Fourth general guideline: make the title and authors names stand out at the top of the poster

Guidance on words:

Make your title clear, to the point and prominent

Show the names of the contributing authors beside the title, in large type

Remember that the poster should be readable from a distance of at least 1 metre. Don't use type less than 24pts.

Use a simple font, not some ornate script that is hard to read (people won't bother)

Tell a story - a story with technical content. Be numerate where required and include the odd vital equation, properly explained, if it is vital

Keep the word count as small as you can, consistent with worthwhile content, 800 words is the absolute maximum, less = better!

Use language appropriate to the audience

Keep sentence structure direct and simple, without being repetitive

Make the words and the graphics work together for you

Teamwork

For posters that are being put together by a small team, arrange to get together with the other team members over a cup of beverage or otherwise and try to tease out what strengths you all bring to the team. Library research will be necessary. Partition out this research, if possible identifying an appropriate theme. Arrange to bring your results to a meeting at a particular time and place.

Firm up on the contents of the poster. Try to find out which members of the team are good with pictures, which with words, which with putting together a story and so on. Try to organise the team so that people do what they are best at.

Partition the job of preparing the ingredients. Give one person the overall charge of the final production (the production manager). Make sure others deliver their components in time. You can put the whole thing together in software as a single sheet (on say the large-format printer in the library). However, this is time-consuming, expensive and needs software and experience beyond anything we currently teach. It is not expected. The traditional assembly method is 'cut-and-paste', using real scissors and glue.

More on making it happen

Use your Internet search skills and your University Library experience to obtain material.

Get going immediately. Things always go wrong or take longer than you expect. Posters can't be planned and executed in an evening. Your first target should be a simple list of headings for possible story-line components and accompanying graphics.

Aim to get together a first draft of the text, graphics and layout no later than one week before your presentation.

Making a poster is an example of an open-ended task. Perfectionists find such tasks particularly difficult because it's hard to know when to stop. The course guidelines

should imply or say explicitly how much time should be spent on the poster. Don't aim to produce something so fancy and elaborate that it will take longer.

Here are a few assembly hints (not rules):

- make your heading big and bold
- use muted colour or grey for the background; more intense colour for borders if you have coloured borders
- put darker pictures on a light background and vice-versa
- a neutral colour in the background will emphasise colour in a picture
- if necessary, show the progress through separated story elements by conspicuous arrows.

Some more practical TIPS:

There are a couple of simple things you can do to make your poster look its best. In addition to the specific tips given above, we have these suggestions:

Make sure your font size is big enough for people to read. We recommend at least 24pt for normal text, 48pt for headings, and 72pt for titles.

Pictures should be between 150 dpi and 300 dpi. Resolutions lower than 150 dpi make your images look blocky, and resolution above 300 dpi make your file bigger without improving the quality. ("dpi" means dots per inch: a 3" x 2" image at 300 dpi would measure 900 x 600 pixels.)

For readability, use black or dark-colored text printed on a white or pastel background. You'll notice most of the great posters in our Gallery follow this advice.

Read Colin Purrington's advice on designing scientific posters. It's full of helpful information and yet funny. One of the best on the web.

See: <http://colinpurrington.com/tips/poster-design>

Feeling lost on graphic design? Clean and simple is the way to go. A great guide to clear scientific graphics is Edward Tufte's The Visual Display of Quantitative Information.

How to make a pdf of your poster?

If you are using PowerPoint for designing your poster, simply save a copy as a PDF form in the software.