Creating Effective Posters

A guide for faculty, staff, students and volunteers

"Looking at the conference posters that communicate well to you is a good start. I think the best thing to do is to literally stand in a corner at meetings, scientific or otherwise, and watch how people look at the posters. You can probably learn a lot just from that. Notice which ones you like. That's what I've done."

Overview

We've all seen posters filled with tiny print, blurry images, and disorganized text. Does anybody read them? A good poster is a well-positioned display of text and images that communicates just the highlights of your program to a mobile audience. The primary goal of a poster is to inform, but it can also advertise or stimulate conversation about ideas and concepts. It always markets your image and the image of your colleagues and institution. Whether you are creating a poster for a scientific conference or putting one together for a community event, the basics are still the same. A good poster:

- Tells a story.
- Can be read from more than 5 feet away.
- Is interesting and eye-catching.
- Has a simple, uncluttered design.
- Uses clear language and images in a logical sequence.
- Summarizes key points without excess detail.

Research has shown that people rarely spend more than five minutes viewing individual posters–approximately one minute per panel–and that's if they actually stop to read. To earn more than a passing glance, make your poster visually appealing and center it around a clear, bold message with a strong title. This is true both for traditional posters that have display panels attached to them, and for computer-generated "rollout" types where the entire poster is printed on a single large sheet.

Slapping up a printout of your PowerPoint presentation or stapling most of your research paper to a board might be easy on you but it can frustrate your readers, who will quickly move on. Take the time to do it right. Boil your message down to a few key points and leave the heavier detail to the supplementary handout you place in front of your poster.

Because a poster reflects both you and your organization, it should always look professional, regardless of your audience.

Organizing Your Message for Your Audience

Who do you want to reach and what do you want to tell them? A poster tells a story about your research results or your program. Determine who your target audience is and then decide what significant message you want them to get from your poster.

- ***Define your audience.***
  Is it scientists at a national conference? Clientele in the farming community? Members of the state legislature at a "Pride Night" event? How old is your audience, what is their level of education, and where are they from?

- ***Decide what you want your audience to DO.***
  Learn something new? Donate time or money? Pick up a handout for more information? Attend a course or seminar? Buy something? Talk with the person staffing the poster?

- ***Review the format you will follow.***
  If it's a research poster, you'll use some version of the standard format: title, name, affiliation, full list of authors, introduction, problem, method, results and conclusions. Posters describing general programs are more free-form, but generally include a title, background information, purpose and description of program, actual or intended results,and contact information.

- ***Write down a rough draft of the story you want to tell.***
  Outline your points in a logical flow, using the clearest terms you can find. Briefly describe the issue, what was done about it, and what you learned or how people can participate. Identify the main point: if you had only one thing to tell your audience, what would it be? Choose key words and phrases and start tailoring the language to suit your audience.

Use jargon and technical language only for an audience of specialists in your field. For everybody else–and this includes scientists who are NOT in your field–minimize jargon and technical terms. For research posters, include only the major key results, not the entire history of the project.

- **Break your story into bullets and blocks of information.**
  Refine your rough draft by cutting out extraneous words and phrases and creating smaller text segments that you can put on display panels. Keep only the best statements, words and images that will attract your audience's attention. Depending on the size of your poster, you should use no more than 7-12 clusters of information.

- **Choose photos and graphs or tables that support and explain your text.**
  Avoid using anything that's hard to figure out, i.e., too blurry, too dark, too complex. Show just enough data to explain your major conclusions.

- **Create logical transitions from one section to the next.**
  Try putting a heading or a one-sentence statement at the beginning of each major section. Or you may want to add numbers or arrows to the sections to assist the reader.

- **Choose an attention-grabbing title.**
  This may be the only thing that differentiates your poster from 100 others scattered around the room.

- **Proofread all text, including photo and graph captions.**
  Check for mistakes in spelling, grammar and punctuation.

- **Optional: Prepare plementary items that will complement your display and suit your audience.**
  Possibilities include copies of your research paper; journal articles; fact sheets; brochures; flyers; business cards; program souvenirs; video monitors with tapes.

"You can't put everything up there: the poster is not the research paper, and the research paper is not the poster. Initially, you have 5-10 seconds to catch the audience's attention so they'll understand your topic and your top one or two points. It should be easily apparent what the flow is and what the key points are. "

Poster Layout and Design

Now that you have selected your target audience and developed your key message, you need to figure out how your poster will look and which materials you'll need.

- **Choose the type of poster you will create:**

- **A standard or modular poster** has moveable display elements that are placed on a board. These can be attached permanently to a poster board, or transported in pieces and assembled with pins or Velcro™-type strips on a board at the conference.

  Advantage: You can alter the message to fit your audience, changing or moving panels and graphic elements.

  Disadvantage: May be more difficult to transport; takes time to set up.

- **A large format printout or rollout** poster is printed in its entirety on a single roll of paper.

  Advantages: Easy to transport and set up, if you don't have to bring the backing board as well.

  Disadvantage: Cannot be altered to fit a smaller or larger space, or to target different audiences; you may be tempted to fill it up with too much text.

- **Find out the exact size allotted for your poster.**
  Wall-mounted scientific posters are generally 4 feet by 8 feet. Table mounted displays might be smaller. Check with conference organizers for the poster size, and whether you will supply the backing or board for your poster or if it will be provided for you at the conference. Community events often provide an 8-foot by 10-foot table for displays.

- **Sketch out your design and start laying out the poster components in a logical sequence on the floor or a large table.**
  Print out your text, cut it up into sets of bullets, gather your photos and graphs. Block out the exact flow of information and images. Try arranging the display elements in rows from left to right or from top to bottom, or place them in a more circular fashion around a central idea, in a "sunburst" pattern.

"A bad poster has too many words, too much text, no bullet format. The organization of information is not broken down properly and you can't read it from a distance. A good poster is easy to read, eye-catching, has good color combinations and interesting points."

"The more I attend meetings and watch how people look at posters, the more I've seen that most people–scientists included–are lazy readers. They'll look at the things that are neat and easy to look at and avoid those things that are overly complex and difficult to read."

"Resist the urge to use the same poster for very different types of audiences."

- **Choose your design elements:** typeface style and font size, background colors, graphics. Good design lets your meaning come through; poor design distracts or even repels the reader. Be creative, keeping the following points in mind:

- *Choose a clear, dark font.* Your typeface should be simple, clean and professional. A well-chosen font lets the meaning of the text shine through. Avoid ornate or italic fonts, and don't use a lot of different font styles. Select one or two and use them consistently. If a commercial printing establishment is going to produce your poster, check immediately to find out which fonts and software they can accept, and how they want you to prepare your file. Don't wait until the last minute or you may need to change everything. For more information on fonts, see the resources section on the back of this brochure.

- **Use large text.** All lettering should be legible from at least 5 feet away. Do not print titles or large blocks of text all in capital letters, and don't use right margin justification. Recommended sizes:

  Title: Large, readable font, 72-point type or larger

  Author/collaborator names and subheadings: Usually 48-point type or larger

  Narrative text: Generally 24-point type or larger

- **Stick to black or dark letters on a white or light background.** White letters on a black background are more difficult to read; so are texts in light colors.

- **Use color sparingly and thoughtfully.** Too much color is confusing–"less is more." One or two accent colors that are eye-catching and appealing can emphasize your subject and clarify the different sections of your poster. Background color includes the color of the board the poster is mounted on, and the colored sheets you place behind your text. Check to find out what background color is provided. If you are bringing your own board you will have more control over the background color, which should be neutral.

- **Choose photos, tables and other graphic elements that enhance the meaning of the text.** Select photos no smaller than 5" x 7" (8" x 10" is better). Don't use boring images of meetings and blurry subjects just to have a photo. Highlight the most important aspect of your poster with a cluster of images and color. Use charts and graphs that are clear, legible and easy to understand, with captions if needed.

- **Remember the 1/3-2/3 rule: 1/3 white space, 2/3 text and images.** Make sure it all flows in a pleasing format that is balanced around a central idea. All the components should work together.

Putting It All Together:
Modular Poster

After designing your poster and gathering the materials, it's time to assemble it:

- *Cut out your display pieces, and trim your photos and charts.* Use a long, clear ruler with a lipped edge when cutting so that you can see your work as you go. Make straight cuts: dull blades or scissors leave ragged edges. Always use a sharp blade and work when you are alert to ensure straight, even edges.

- *Place all display elements in order.* Use a board or a taped section on the floor or wall and step back to see how it looks. Take the time before you leave for the event to replace what doesn't look right. If it doesn't look right to you it definitely won't look right to your audience. Have a peer critique it.

- *Write down your sequence of display elements or photograph your poster layout.* Put it in a folder with your poster components (text, images and background papers, pins and other fasteners) so you'll remember how you want it to look when you start to construct the poster on site. A Polaroid™ or digital camera works well for this.

- *When transporting display items that have Velcro™ backing:* be sure to pack them face to face so the Velcro™ does not scratch the printed panels.

- *When you construct the poster on site:* take a minute to step back and view the poster. Straighten any crooked pieces and remove anything that is distracting before your audience arrives.

FONT SIZES:

18 22 24 32 48 60 96 pt.

Putting It All Together:

Large Format Printout Poster

- **Print out a hard copy of your final poster version.**
  Submit both the hard copy and a disk to the printer.

- **Make sure the word processing or graphics program you're using is compatible with the commercial printer's software.**
  Use an acceptable font; certain fonts downloaded from the Internet may not work.

- **Choose the poster material best suited to your needs and budget.**
  Large format posters can be produced on paper, with or without lamination, or printed on vinyl.

- **Allow enough lead time**
  Most printers need at least 24 - 48 hours.

- **Protect your poster**
  Transport it rolled up in a tube.

"One of the most egregious errors is not putting your name, contact information and institution on the poster! People somehow have the mistaken idea that the conference organizers are going to put little names on each one. And amazingly, I still see posters without a title, either. These are dangerous things to omit when we're trying to promote not only our message, but our credibility as well."

Resources–Web and Print

Some good sources on the Internet for creating posters include the following:

www.siam.org/siamnews/general/poster.htm
ublib.buffalo.edu/libraries/units/sel/bio/posters.html
www.aaas.org/meetings/2000/poster_guidelines.htm
www.tss.uoguelph.ca/resources/tt/epd/epd.html
ib.berkeley.edu/posters/printing/design.type.html
fbox.vt.edu/eng/mech/writing/courses/presentations/poster/sld001.htm

Many professional societies have published guidelines on poster design. Here is example:

The ACS Style Guide: A Manual for Authors and Editors, 2nd edition
Janet S. Dodd, editor
The American Chemical Society
ISBN 0841234620

For information on fonts and design:

The Non-Designer's Design Book, Robin Williams
Peachpit Press, Berkeley, CA
ISBN 1566091594

A list of suggested poster materials is available online at:

ag.arizona.edu/ecat/pubs/posters

THE DON'T LIST

A good poster doesn't need to be expensive but it does need to have a good design and an interesting message. Here's what you should NEVER do:

Don't—

- Use your actual research paper as the poster.
- Use a text font smaller than 24 points.
- Clutter the board with too much text or too many images.
- Use too many different colors or patterns.
- Use lots of jargon or boring language.
- Make sloppy cuts on your panels.
- Use light letters on a dark background.
- Leave out the title, your institution, and your name.
- Forget to proofread your poster.

"From a technical standpoint the biggest downfall of large format printout posters is just that the type size selected is often too small. Everybody should know that your average person can't read a 12- or 14-point font at a six-foot distance. It should be much larger than that. The second biggest complaint with posters is that they try to convey too much with words and not enough with images. If those two things were fixed we could get rid of 90 percent of the problems."

Note: Comments printed in the blue boxes throughout this guide were excerpted from interviews with CALS faculty and students.