

Creating Poster Presentations

Adam Warren
Aston University

Before you start: why, what and who?

Why create a poster? You see posters everywhere, advertising everything from food, drink and phones to TV shows, charities and safety campaigns. Their aim is always to attract your attention and then deliver their message quickly and memorably. The same is true of academic posters like the one you have been asked to create. These are typically seen along corridors in your department or on display at conferences and provide a brief overview of some research.

Beware! A poster is not a condensed version of a journal article that follows a set structure: abstract, literature review, experimental study, data analysis, conclusion and references. Instead, you may want to think about these questions - although you may not choose to answer them in this order on your poster:

- What question or problem were you trying to answer?
- What did you find out? Why is it important?
- What are the key pieces of prior research?
- What recommendations do you have for further research?
- How did you gather and analyse your data?

Remember that no-one will spend longer than a couple of minutes reading your poster, so make sure you get the words right before you start the visual design. Posters usually have between 300-800 words. If you have a lot of text, the font size must be smaller to fit it on the poster and that immediately makes it more difficult and less appealing to read. Less is more! Think of it as the visual equivalent of the 'elevator pitch' where you have just a couple of minutes to explain what your research topic is and why you find it fascinating and important.

It is essential to think about your audience. Who will be reading the poster? What are they hoping to learn? What language, jargon or assumed knowledge is appropriate? For academic posters, the audience is usually other academics working in the same field, so the language needs to be fairly formal but you can assume a good deal of specialist knowledge.

Finally, if this is an assignment you need to pay special attention to the marking criteria to get the best mark you can. And if it is your poster for a conference, get some feedback from friends and colleagues on your first draft; it should be easy to print out an A4 version or send them a PDF.

Practical issues

Conferences usually specify the size and orientation of posters. For example, they frequently need to be A1 and portrait, so if you turn up with an A0 landscape poster there may not be room for it on the display boards. If in doubt, ask the organisers.

Portrait posters are taller than they are wide (e.g. A1 is 59cm wide and 84cm tall) while landscape posters are wider than they are tall (e.g. A1 is 84cm wide and 59cm tall).

Posters are printed in standard sizes. Normal photocopier paper is A4 (21x30cm) and A3 is twice as big (30x42cm). A2 is twice as big as A3, A1 is double again (59x84cm) and A0 is a massive 84x118cm. Needless to say, the bigger the poster the more it costs to print. This is an excellent reason to print

out a small A3 version of your poster to check VERY CAREFULLY for errors and typos before you pay to have the full-sized copy printed.

It is well worth paying a bit extra to have your poster laminated with a plastic coating; it makes the colours more vibrant, prevents creasing and looks more professional. Your poster will last much longer, especially if you plan to display it in your department afterwards.

Top tips for poster design

Use headings to break up your text and clearly identify each part. Conferences often have a lot of posters, so many attendees look first at 'what you found out' to see if it is interesting and relevant, and move swiftly on to the next poster if it isn't.

Use bullet points, lists and tables to summarise and organise information.

The text must be readable from about 2m, so the minimum font size is 18 points and ideally 20 or 24 points. Use a serif (e.g. Arial) or san-serif font (e.g. Georgia). As a general rule, avoid Comic Sans and other fancy fonts.

Ensure that the text colour is a good contrast to its background colour; so dark text on pale backgrounds or vice versa. Avoid red, green or mid-tone colours such as brown as many people find them difficult to read.

Keep line lengths relatively short (50 - 75 characters) and left-justified to enhance readability. The line spacing should be around 1.2 times the font, for example 18pt text on 22pt spacing.

Carefully proof-read ALL the text, especially the title and headings. Somehow, the bigger the font the easier it is to miss errors. Don't be the person with a typo in the title!

If possible, present data as a chart or graph. Make sure these are easy to take in at a glance by careful use of colour, line thickness, font sizes and labels. If possible, avoid legends and instead label the data directly. All charts and graphs should have a descriptive title above or below them so it is clear what they are showing.

If your topic has suitable relevant graphics such as photos, diagrams or maps, use them! Make sure they are good quality and of sufficiently high resolution. For photos, a good rule of thumb is at least 150 pixels per inch (60 pixels per cm) when printed, so a 6-megapixel image (3000x2000 pixels) can be up to 20 inches or 50 cm wide.

If you need to include the logos of your institution and/or funding bodies, make sure they are high-quality images; not one grabbed from a web page and enlarged so it is blurry! If you can't get a proper image file, you can often download a PDF document that includes the logo, zoom in until the logo fills the screen and then take a screen-grab. Use an image editor to crop and save just the logo as a PNG file for best quality.

Don't fill the poster with information; leave plenty of room around each element (text, graph, photo etc.) so they don't crowd each other. The more 'dense' your poster looks, the less likely people are to try and read it. But at the same time, you need to include enough detail to satisfy your audience. It's a balancing act that may require careful editing to add, remove or rewrite text and/or change the size and position of graphic elements.

Don't forget to include your name, contact details, research group, department and institution. If applicable you will also need to acknowledge your funding bodies. You should also include any references required in the correct format, but can use a smaller font (14pt) for these.

Think carefully about the main title of your poster as it probably the most important way of attracting people to come and look at your poster. How can you 'sell' your research? Can you phrase it as a question? Try and keep it to one line, or one line and a slightly smaller font subtitle.

If you have graphic design skills, you can try more adventurous or visually striking layouts, but make sure that the design helps communicate your message. Make sure you get your text and supporting graphics right and don't fall into the trap of focusing on style over substance.

The best way to learn how to design good academic posters is to take a second look at any that you see. Your first look is about the content: "Is this research relevant or interesting to me?" Your second look is at the design. Do you like it? What are its good features? What are its bad features? Are there any parts of the design that you could adapt and adopt for your own posters? All graphic designers "borrow and blend" visual ideas that they see... so why snap a photo of posters you like to inspire your next creation?