

How to Make a Great Poster

by Dina F. Mandoli

University of Washington

Department of Botany,.KB-15

Seattle, Washington 98195

Making a great poster can be fun and is certainly a challenge! Here are some ideas about how to get the most attention for your efforts.

I. A GREAT POSTER IS...

readable,

Readability is a measure of how easily the ideas flow from one item to the next. Text that has lots of grammatical problems, complex or passive sentence structure, and misspellings is "hard to read".

legible,

If a text is legible, it can be deciphered. For example, an old book may not be legible if the paper has corroded or the lettering has faded. A common error in poster presentations is use of fonts that are too small to be read from 6-10 feet away, a typical distance for reading a poster.

well organized,and

Spatial organization makes the difference between reaching 95% rather than just 5% of your audience: time spent hunting for the next idea or piece of data is time taken away from thinking about the science.

succint.

Studies show that you have only 11 seconds to grab and retain your audience's attention so make the punchline prominent and brief. Most of your audience is going to absorb only the punchline. Those who are directly involved in related research will seek you out anyway and chat with you at length so you can afford to leave out **all** the details and tell those who are really interested the "nitty gritty" later.

II. TWO WAYS TO MAKE A POSTER ARE TO

have someone else do it, or

A professional illustrator will ask you about all the items in this presentation! Although they will execute the work, you are the final arbiter of the quality and content of the poster.

make your own.

III. TO BEGIN:

decide what the main message is,

Keep it short and sweet and make this your title! Use the active voice and avoid the verb "to be" whenever possible.

measure the space you have,

Laying out the space physically as well as on paper is a quick way to double check yourself. If you can, make the poster flexible enough to change the size by adding or omitting elements. This flexibility is handy if you are going to more than one meeting and the meetings differ in size requirements for posters or if you wish to update your data.

lay out your elements crudely,

Before you actually spend time making the final elements of the poster, take pieces of paper that are about the right size and see if you can actually make it all fit. This will save you a lot of time in the long run.

ELIMINATE all extraneous material,

Given that the average poster gazer spends less than 10 minutes on your work and you have 11 seconds to trap your subject before they move on, only show data that adds to your central message. You do need a Title, Authors, Introduction, Results, and Conclusions. Some meetings require you to include the abstract also. Usually, condensing or even omitting Materials & Methods is a good start: most people will not read them anyway. If you wish, have a methods handout for those who ask for it. Although sometimes the method is essential to understand the data or the validity of the conclusions, most of the time, a short version here will do as well.

begin to make individual components of the poster!

Most posters are most quickly made using some kind of computer software. A word processing program plus a few graphics packages (e.g. Microsoft Excel, MacDraw Pro, Quatra

Pro) are important tools. Combining computer-generated text and graphics with photographs and drawings adds interest.

IV. POSTER LAYOUT

How to arrange poster elements and text within each panel.

People approach new information in a known spatial sequence. The title and your name will be seen in the first 11 seconds that a person looks at the poster because they will be centered at the top. This will be all many people will read, so the poster title should be your punch line.

The overall format of a good poster is dictated by the way we assimilate information. For example, you would never put your first panel on the right and ask your reader to proceed to the left because we are not trained to read that way. Newspaper format, two vertical columns that are arranged so that you read the left one first and then the right one, is highly "readable" since the reader does not spend time figuring out which panel to read next. A left to right horizontal rows arrangement works too but is not as common, probably because it would require a reader to walk back and forth in front of the poster, which could be difficult in a crowded session.

Space is important in a poster: without it, your reader has no visual pauses to think. Books leave space on the margins and by having chapters. Posters that are crammed with information are tiring to read and are seldom read in their entirety. Omit all extraneous text or visual distractions, including borders between related data and text, so the reader can assimilate your ideas easily.

Size of poster elements or the fonts in each element can serve to emphasize the main points. For example, making your subheadings in all capitals and significantly larger than the rest of the text on the same panel will draw the reader's eye first, and so be emphasized.

You will lend the most power to your words if you spatially arrange the text in each panel of your poster following the same principles used for the poster layout as a whole. A common street sign reads "go CHILDREN slow". Because the word "CHILDREN" is in capitals larger than the other words and is in the center of the image, you read "Children, go slow" even though that is not the actual spatial arrangement of the words in the sign. This sign is powerful, succinct, and highly readable.

Practical matters.

It takes time to make a great poster. Allow several days to assemble all the bits and pieces, cut all the boards and assemble the poster physically. That last bit of data you rush around to get at the last moment will go completely unnoticed if your poster is messy and disorganized i.e. illegible and unreadable.

Posters can be made in many styles. Roll-up single piece prints, individual boards, hinged boards that fold together are all common, and your choice will depend on portability and ease of assembly as well as cost and personal taste. If you must fly to a meeting, the poster should fit into carry-on luggage so that even if your suitcase is lost, you can still present your work. If all your poster panels can stack and be packaged together, so much the better. When you get to the meeting, your life will be simplified if your poster is easy to assemble on site. If you cannot do it by yourself or the poster is awkward for one person to mount on the materials provided, be sure you arrange for someone to help you. A map of how the poster should look when it is done is handy when you need to work quickly. In addition, make sure your poster will be easily mounted with materials available. For example, foam board makes a nice, stiff back for a poster, but is difficult to mount with tacks or push pins because it is too thick.

V. FONT CHOICE:

sizes,

A good rule is to stand back from your own poster: if you, who is familiar with the material, cannot easily read it from 6 feet away, your audience will certainly not be able to.

highlighting with text format,

Indents set text apart and are great for short lists.

Justification of text in the center of a line will draw attention.

Use bold-face, color, or special characters to draw attention.

VI. COLOR

ways to add color,

Mounting boards are a fast way to add a color border to poster elements. Choosing a color that does not compete with your data is wise.

Colored yarn is effective in visually linking poster elements.

Colored graphic tape or dots, and white arrows (Chartpak, Letraset) can be quickly applied to poster elements to draw attention to the elements you wish to.

contrast,

Proper contrast will reduce eye strain and make the poster more legible and interesting visually. Again, be careful that the color does not outclass the visual impact of your data: too much contrast is hard on the eyes and can distract the reader from your data.

Adding light color backgrounds to your figures can make the poster attractive. For example, using white lettering and lines on a blue background can make your poster eye-catching. Poster elements can also be double matted to add interesting contrast.

VII. FINAL CHECK BEFORE YOU ASSEMBLE THE POSTER

Have some people look over your poster before you put it all together. If they are confused, it is far better to fix it now than to lose people at the meeting. Pay particular attention to things that may not be necessary: eliminate everything that you can!

modified by Holly Gorton, 8 March 1998