

Poster Making 101

Scientific posters generally serve two purposes. They let you advertise your work to a substantial number of people. Secondly, they provide detailed facts and figures that supplement discussion between yourself and those who are particularly interested in your project/experiment. This more detailed exchange takes place in a small group atmosphere in front of the poster 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, the majority of presentations at scientific meetings are poster presentations.

Some Important Guidelines

This is the most important section of the handout. It points you in the right direction. If you're not pointing in the right direction then you probably won't reach the right place, no matter how many careful steps you take!

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

The essential ingredients on a poster are **a title**, clear enough to attract all who might be interested, **the authors' names**, reporting those who have contributed to the work, and **a conspicuous message**. Conveying the message occupies most of the space available and it is here that many poster designers fall down. The message frequently gets further buried in far too much detail. In due course you may forget most of what's in these notes but remember this one fact: the 3 basic ingredients of a poster are **title, authors, and message**.

How do you go about designing a poster? Begin at the end. What is the purpose of the poster? Posters vary in purpose from the advertising poster, which fills our street hordings and magazines, to the advanced technical conference presentation aimed at describing work done and presenting conclusions. For a scientific poster, top priority is clarity of the verbal message, followed closely by good visual impact.

Advertising posters want to create a single, lasting message. 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 on the floor (i.e. on poster boards) competing for attention in the afternoon. At the last conference I went to, there were two poster sessions of 500 posters each, lasting a week. 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. However, visual impact made at the expense of clarity of message doesn't work either. A common mistake is to have a visually ornate background in bright colors that makes the words used hard to

read easily. This is a sure way to encourage the busy viewer to walk right past your offering.

First guideline: Make clarity of message the top priority.

Second guideline: Make visual impact the second 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.

Take another page from the advertisers' handbook 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, 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 more information can talk with you at the poster session.

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 meter. Don't use type less than 18pt.
- Use a simple font, not some ornate script that is hard to read
- Tell a story
- Keep the word count as small as you can, consistent with worthwhile content
- Use language appropriate to the audience. Keep sentence structure direct and simple, without being repetitive