A STEP BY STEP GUIDE

TO

EFFECTIVE POSTER DESIGN[1]

"Communicating with your colleagues"

---

[1] Authour unknown, public domain, first used by Poster Chair IUFOST, 1991, Toronto, ON.

Well done!

Your paper has been accepted for presentation at a conference poster session. The content is ready. Photographs, charts, tables, etc. have been made. Now all you have to do is set it all up in a power-point file. But, presenting your paper in a poster session is different from presenting your paper to a journal which can be read by the readers at their leisure.

POSTER NOISE

At poster sessions, there is intense competition for audience attention. The room will be filled with posters sporting a wealth of information and ideas.

How can you ensure that your poster will be noticed, let alone read?

THE HARSH REALITY

The harsh reality is that in a roomful of posters and people, you have less than 3 seconds to attract attention to your poster. Within those 3 seconds, your poster needs to convey its central theme.

If you are successful in capturing the audience, you will have an additional 60 seconds to impart a clear understanding of the problem/process/conclusion you want to convey. Take advantage of the opportunity ... a poster on display for several hours provides the opportunity for making valuable contacts and engaging in a dialogue with colleagues. However, if your poster does not immediately grab people's attention, your efforts have been in vain.

The following guidelines are intended to help you organize the ideas and information in your paper to create an effective poster design. It may look like more work - but the pay off is worth it.

This guide to creating posters will take you through 5 important steps:

Step 1   Define your audience
Step 2   Gather the content for your poster
Step 3   Organize and interpret the content
Step 4   Find your focus
Step 5   Put it together

STEP 1: DEFINE YOUR AUDIENCE

The audience at a poster session can be quite diverse. It is critical that you define your audience.

Is the audience your colleagues? If so, think about:
    * what your audience already knows
    * what will be of most interest to those doing similar research
    * emphasizing the visual - it helps to facilitate the process of communication

Is the audience the general public? If so, think about:
    * paring down the detail
    * defining or eliminating scientific terminology
    * emphasizing the visual display to encourage and facilitate
      understanding

STEP 2: GATHER THE CONTENT FOR YOUR POSTER

Divide the information you have into the following main sections (or use your own section headings):
        - title
        - abstract
        - method
        - results
        - conclusion

Use a separate file folder or envelope for each section and label it with the section heading. Place all the appropriate resources (copy, photos, illustrations, charts, etc.) in each folder. Check the content of each folder. Do you have all the relevant information?

SECTION	WHAT TO INCLUDE	RATIONALE
TITLE	Name of poster, contributors, organization .	This is how your poster will be listed in the program. Many select which posters they will go to see based on title.
ABSTRACT	Statement giving quick overview of poster. The abstract should also include a statement of the problem.	Should provide enough background for the non-specialist to understand the purpose of the study.
METHOD	Brief description of the processes and procedures.	Use point form where possible.
RESULTS	Outcomes, findings, data.	Look for a graphic way to interpret this information.
CONCLUSION	Summary, discussion of significance of results, a few easily remembered key conclusions.	Keep it simple to make it memorable.

STEP 3: ORGANIZE AND INTERPRET THE CONTENT

Take each of your folders and organize the contents into 3 categories:

- HEADING - title, topic
- STATEMENT - text relating to the heading - one sentence
- SUPPORT MATERIAL - includes documentation, photographs, maps, diagrams, charts, illustrations, etc.

Eliminating noise: (edit, edit, edit!)
* eliminate all but the vital elements
* use point form - it is easier to read than sentences
* reduce your information to brief but concise, legible statements
* whenever possible, reinterpret text as charts, graphs or illustrations

STEP 4: FIND YOUR FOCUS "The Attention Grabber"

Now ask yourself, if there was one thing you could say on the poster, what would it be? Review each edited section and select the one item, a statement, photograph or diagram, that is sure to attract your audience's attention immediately. This is your 3 second hit; it should be the best part, or what you think best depicts the theme of your poster.

Your focus item should be enlarged so that it will occupy at least 30% of the area of the finished poster. Remember that your audience will not approach you if it is not clear what your topic or theme is from a "safe distance" of 10 feet.

The focus could be:

A Photograph: "before" and "after" photos to illustrate change, a photographic enlargement highlighting the area of interest, a combination of a photo and a line drawing to interpret it;

A Diagram: to show how a process works, to indicate relationships with the entire process;

A Chart/Graph: to visually depict results;

An Illustration:

Or a Lead-in Statement:

STEP 5: PUT IT TOGETHER

How you display your information is just as important as its accuracy. Take time to plan your visual display. Before you move on to the final layout, several considerations will help increase the poster's effectiveness.

Think about
- Colour
- Text (size, style, typeface)
- Visuals (photographs, illustrations etc.)
- Space
- Layout

Colour:

Never use colour on a poster display only for its own sake; it should always be used for good reason and in limited quantities.

1. A single background colour serves to unify a poster and clearly distinguish it from neighbouring posters.

2. Colours which are somewhat muted or greyed, provide a more restful background. In a hall crowded with other posters and people, such colour is more likely to bring attention to your work.

   When selecting a background colour, remember that neutral colours such as grey, beige, light green and cream work best because they act as a natural foil to the material that will be displayed on top. Avoid using yellow, orange or red which would distract from your ideas.

   If you produce the components of your poster in modular form, you may be attaching them to a coloured background panel provided.

3. Colour can enhance the hues or contrast of photographs. Dark photographs will look darker on a light background, colour photographs will look more vibrant when displayed on a neutral background.

4. Colour can be used to highlight, separate, define and associate information.

5. Colours are often used for coding. As the number of colour-coded items increase, the value of colour as a cue for selecting important information decreases.

6. Text: Black text is clean and easy to read. Coloured text is more difficult to read.

Text:

1. Size: Your audience shouldn't need a magnifying glass to read your information. Standard word processing text is too small! A common error in poster design is using text that is too small and spaced too far apart.

   Recommended text heights for a poster are:

   Focus: Heading 1"   Text 1/2"

   Support: Heading 1/2" Text (labels) 1/4" minimum

2. Style: Using the minimum text size of 1/4" height, select a typeface that can be read comfortably from a distance of 3 to 4 feet.

3. Typeface:

   * Text must complement the graphics, photographs and tables
   * Avoid ornate and italic styles
   * Open rounded letters are preferred to condensed, small-
     bodied letters
   * Bold face can be used for titles, headings or for emphasis
   * A sans-serif is the most legible ("serif" refers to the
     small line used to finish off a main stroke of a letter)
   * A "WORD" all in capital letters is more difficult to read
     than a "Word" with the first letter capitalized and the
     remaining letters in lower case

Visuals: Make the most of the illustrations you have:

1. Make sure that illustrations are big enough to be recognized comfortably from a distance of 6 feet.

2. Visuals for instruction should be attractive, clear and specific, not ambiguous.

3. All non-essential information should be removed from figures.

4. All maps and diagrams should have a brief title and be clearly labelled. The legend has a great impact on image perception. To a large degree viewers see what they are told to see in an image.

5. Labels on photographs, graphs and diagrams need to have a minimum type size of 1/4" height.

6. Colour photographs enhance the poster but need not be used if black and white photos communicate the point equally well.

Space:

You don't need to fill every square inch of your allotted space. A busy layout can lead to audience confusion and distraction. Adequate white space (the background board on which you display your information) will direct attention to the key elements which you have selected to present to the audience.

1. Leave a substantial amount of white space. A well-designed poster might have up to 50% white space.

2. Information should flow from left to right and from top to bottom.

3. Long visual lines help organize groups of information. Think about hanging pieces of information from an imaginary clothesline so that the tops will all be at the same level.

4. Remember that the eye looks for edges. Align edges in groups of photographs. Align headings and text material. Align X or Y axes in groups of graphs.

5. Groups of related information function best if arranged close together within a defined border.

If you are using the modular format, remember that the same guidelines apply when arranging the components on the background display panel. It is important to be consistent in the placement and spacing of headings, etc. in order to line up the information when assembling the whole poster.

Layout:

Now, let's put it all together and do a rough layout of your final poster:

1. On a piece of newsprint the same size as your finished poster (approximately 72" x 48") map out the layout of your information (headings, statements, text, photographs, diagrams, etc.). Alternatively, you can use masking tape on a desktop or on the floor to delineate the actual dimensions of the poster.

2. Roughly letter the headings in the appropriate size on a separate piece of paper and cut them out.

3. Place your information on the newsprint, section by section. Remember, don't crowd your information, make sure sections are clearly defined with adequate spacing.

4. Re-arrange until you are satisfied and ready to take the poster to the final production stage. Portability is an important concern when you produce your poster. The modular format is an effective approach to creating a poster that will have little risk of damage in transit. A full-size poster can be rolled and transported in a mailing tube for protection.

ASSESSING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF YOUR POSTER

If you encountered this poster at a poster session, would you stop to look at it? If you stopped to look at this poster, do you think you would read the text on it?

** Is the poster directed to your target audience?
      - is the level of content appropriate for your colleagues?
      - is the content approachable for a general audience?

** Does the title of the poster stand out?
      - is the lettering large enough, clear, well-spaced?
      - is the message clear and concise?

** Does the focus item succeed in attracting attention to the poster?
      - does it accurately depict the theme of the poster?
      - does it occupy at least 30% of the finished paper?

** Is the text readable, legible and well worth reading?

- has the content been edited well?
- readability in this context can be defined as the degree of linguistic difficulty
- legibility refers to letter size, typographic style, distance between lines, line length, colour of the letter versus background colour

** Has colour been used appropriately?
- to highlight?
- to group?
- as a neutral background?

** Have the illustrations been used to best advantage?
- to interpret content?
- are they large enough to be seen from a distance of 3 feet?
- are they attractive but "unambiguous"?
- has a legend or caption been used to guide the viewer?

** Is the final layout visually pleasing?
- does the poster have sufficient white space?
- are sections clearly defined with adequate space around them?
- have items been aligned?
- is there a logical flow of information?

_