How to Make Your Poster Stand Out

Past student poster winners give tips on how to design, organize, and prep for your poster presentation.

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Designing Your Poster

PROGRAM
• Adobe Illustrator can be used to create posters and then export them to a pdf.
• Other options include Affinity Designer and PowerPoint.

TIP: If problems come up, the most helpful resources concerning navigating software and finding answers to formatting issues are YouTube video tutorials and community support pages.

LAYOUT
• Starting with figures can be helpful because these will take up a lot of space.
• Next, create headings for each section to keep your poster organized.
• Under your title, you might consider adding a short description that gets the main point of your poster across.
• When formatting your reference list, refer to the most recent edition of the reference style you are using and be sure all your reference entries have consistent formatting.

TIP: Attendees will be drawn to posters with large figures and relatively little text, since it is easier to absorb information through a detailed and adequately labeled figure rather than reading large blocks of text.

FONT
• 20 to 24 point text size is suggested. Too many different fonts can be confusing and distracting. You might choose one for the headings/title and a second for the text and figure captions, but not more than two if possible.
• Consider using black, white, and gray for text and text backgrounds—colored text and colored text backgrounds can be very hard to read for people with vision issues.

TIP: Online resources include color palettes for colorblind people, and there is a phone app that uses the camera to show you what something would look like to people with different types of colorblindness to make sure that everything is readable and accessible.
Organizing Your Poster

PLAN

• One resource for getting started on a poster is to look through other examples. You might walk the halls of your department and take notes on how other posters were laid out. Consider looking online for ideas on organization, including this resource.

• When deciding how to organize a poster, you should consider the most influential factors to be (1) the required poster dimensions, (2) the quantity of figures you need to concisely present your research and how large they must be to be legible from a one-meter distance, and (3) how large text boxes need to be so that they are legible from a one-meter distance, since the font size will determine how much information can be included.

• Begin by drawing a rough sketch of how you imagine the main figure(s) will look, since the attention of most poster viewers is drawn in first by the figures.

TIP: It may be a good idea to run your ideas by your advisor early and often in the planning stage before you get too far into designing your poster, because they will probably have great suggestions for a more effective way to illustrate the data and concepts.

CREATE

• One effective way to organize a poster is to divide it into three sections in a left to right sequence like a brochure—an introductory section, a middle “results” or data-rich section that also may include methods, and a discussion/implications section, from left to right. The middle section or center of the poster may be the widest because it is where the data and figures that are the bulk of the project will appear. Make sure to clearly label each section.

• You might split up the central part of your poster into boxes for regions or categories like rock units of your field area, sized based on the amount of data you have for each. These could be arranged around a map of the field area in the center of the poster—so essentially, the map can be used to organize your data, which is consistently labeled as figures or results.

TIP: Select the most important parts of your project that you want to discuss with people and that contribute to a clear understanding of your work—do not cram in too much detail. For the most part, people only have a few minutes to spend talking to you about your project, so less is more.
Prepping for Your Presentation

PRACTICE

• **Talk through your poster** with someone who is not familiar with your project. This could be a non-scientist or family member. It helps to see what the logical flow of the poster is to someone else so that you can adjust the content to emphasize important points with a box or bold font.

• Since you typically do not have much time to present, make sure to **focus on the most important parts of your research**. Often, the questions you receive will give you an opportunity to share other aspects of the research.

• Present your poster to your advisor(s) or a fellow student and **write down the questions** that they ask. Prepare to fully **explain your methods** and interpretations, why they were chosen, what led you to your conclusions, and perhaps why other currently acceptable methods or techniques were not feasible for your study. Be prepared to address what you may have done differently if you had the chance to do it again and where you **see areas for improvement for future work**.

• Finally, prepare an **elevator speech** on your **career aspirations** and practice it on your peers. These speeches should be no more than one minute and should give a quick jargon-free overview of your interests.

*Tip: Talking through your poster in advance will help with the questions, discussion, and presentation on-site. If you have gone through the poster many times, you will have a better idea of what to focus on to answer specific questions. Skipping around the poster based on peoples’ questions becomes easier the more times you have talked through the poster.*
Drawing Attention to Your Poster

CREATE BUZZ

- Consider asking some of the people whose papers you cited to come talk to you about your poster. They can offer insight, and they will usually be excited to talk to you about a topic they have worked on.

- Ask your advisor to introduce you to someone at the meeting who is working on similar topics before the poster session to put you at ease and help you be less nervous when they come to your poster.

- You might also ask a friend or two to come see your poster presentation toward the beginning of the session. This can help calm your nerves down, and it catches the attention of people passing by who might be interested if they overhear you talking about your project.

TIP: Poster presentations are also an excellent time to get some insights on your project. Showing what you know from your research is just the start—people who talk to you during your poster presentation often have interesting questions or comments that can teach you a lot about your topic. This can be a great time to ask questions of experts on the subject, and it can be especially exciting when you have read someone’s paper and they come talk to you.