An Insider's Insight into Poster Presentations

Posters are an excellent opportunity to showcase your work, stimulate feedback and build your research network.

We offer some insights from the Niche medical writing team, who have been producing research posters for the pharmaceutical industry and academia since 1998.

Anyone can read the many guidelines on what makes a great poster, but can they produce something that looks professional and clearly communicates your message? Niche can and does.

Before you start

- Scientific meetings often have strict criteria for poster format and content. Follow the conference organiser's guidelines.

- Details are usually provided on the association's website and may include: poster dimensions and orientation, font sizes, expected content etc.

- The organiser may provide a poster template. Alternatively, you are welcome to use one of our tried and tested poster templates. Please contact us if you would like a copy.

- Give yourself sufficient time to plan, write, design and print your poster.

Prepare to succeed

- Many of us think we learnt the art of poster presentations during our studies, but looking at some posters displayed at recent scientific meetings it seems that a refresher would be useful.

- A successful poster should capture the viewer's attention and communicate the key points of the research clearly and succinctly.

- However, posters are often cluttered or chaotic, contain too much information, use fonts that are too small and have poorly stated research objectives [1].

- Follow the insights provided here to avoid making any of these common mistakes.

Poster Design

Your poster should be well laid out, using visuals in preference to large blocks of text. Diagrams, tables and photographs aid readability and attract attention. Use graphics and text boxes to guide the viewers' eyes from one frame to another in a logical fashion.

Take time to look at posters from other researchers before you decide on a design. Look for examples that you find visually attractive, fulfil the criteria defined here and meet with the requirements of the conference organisers.

All aspects of the poster should relate succinctly to clearly stated findings – keep the message simple.

Aim to capture the attention of the viewer. According to the 10–10 rule, most attendees are only likely to spend 10 seconds scanning your poster from a distance of 10 feet as they walk past your stand [2].

1 Text

Left-justify text; avoid centring and right-justification. Use a serif font (e.g., Times) for text blocks – they are easier to read. Sans-serif fonts (e.g., Helvetica) are acceptable for titles and headings. The font should be consistent throughout the poster and viewers should be able to read it from a distance of 2 metres. Consider using at least 85 point for the title, 56 point for the authors' names, 36-44 point for subheadings, 24-34 point for text in the main body, and 18 point for captions. Use larger font sizes for headings, your research objective and key findings or conclusions.

2 Graphics

Use graphics where possible to illustrate your findings, they are more eye-catching than tables.

Tables are better than text – when using tables try not to exceed five rows and five columns. Balance the placement of text and graphics (figures and/or images) to create visual appeal (see Figure 1). Keep figures simple, for example use two-dimensional line graphs, bar charts or pie charts. Lines in figures should be heavy and symbols, numbers and letters large enough and positioned appropriately to be easily understood.

3 Colour

Colour makes a poster more accessible to the viewer – but use it with caution, particularly patterned backgrounds. You should use colour to attract attention, organise information and emphasise key points.

Only use coloured fonts that contrast strongly with the background (avoid dark backgrounds as they can make text difficult to read). Stick to a theme of two or three colours throughout the poster and be consistent in their use.

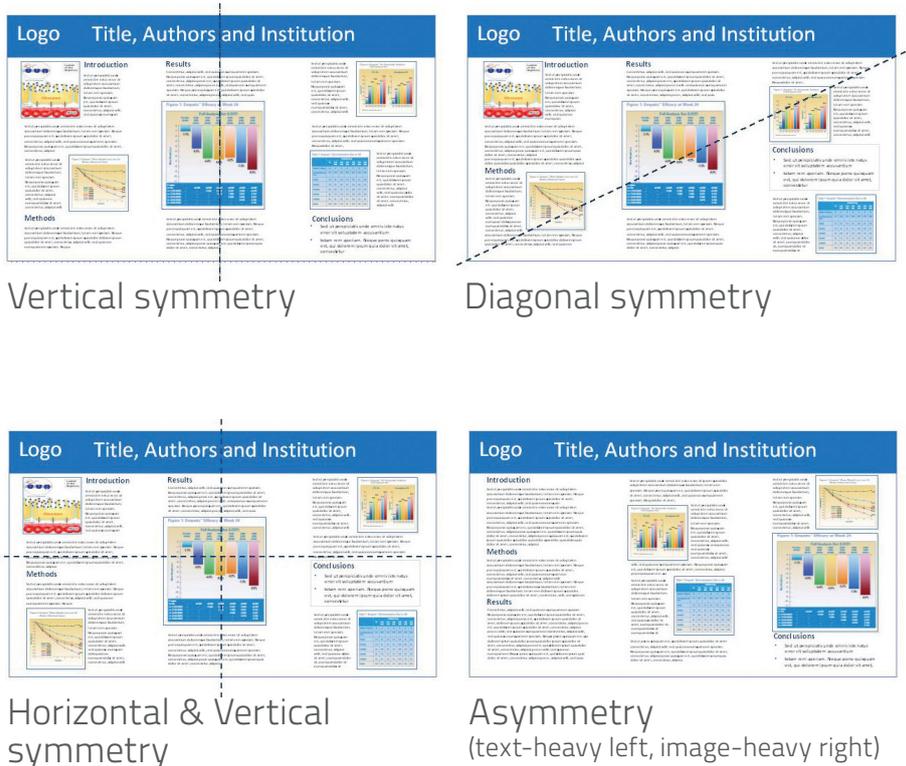You can view some poster design options on our website.

Key insights

A conference attendee's retention of your scientific messages will depend on the simplicity with which you state them. This can best be achieved through the compelling use of images and short blocks of text. Use the active voice and avoid jargon. Organise materials into well-recognised sections (Title, Introduction, etc.), use empty space and boldface headings to define different sections, employ a structured column format (three to five columns) and arrange material vertically from the top left to bottom right (see Figure 1).

Most posters contain too much text. Use plain language, keep strings of text to a minimum (<50 words) and employ bullets to emphasise points. Be bold and explicit, making the strongest statements your data will support[2].

Make it easy for conference attendees to contact you after the meeting. Have your contact details clearly displayed on your poster and handouts.

Figure 1: Arranging the different components of posters to deliver visually attractive design

Vertical symmetry

Diagonal symmetry

Horizontal & Vertical symmetry

Asymmetry
(text-heavy left, image-heavy right)

Interview with our House Editor

Q What is your one guiding principle when writing a poster?

A Be ruthless when reviewing your first draft. Dispense with unnecessary details. Reducing the amount of text allows you to focus on your key finding and what it means.

Use the available space wisely and don't try to include everything: where poster design is concerned less is often more. The most common mistake is to put too much emphasis on describing the methods. I always ask myself which details are absolutely essential for conveying the work's message.

Pet hate: Use of clipart (it looks so unprofessional).

Q What do you look for when you review posters?

A In the end, the greatest visual appeal will never make up for poor content. I want to know what the objective of the work was, what the researchers observed and how they interpret their findings. Most often this is hidden within the body of posters where it is difficult to find.

In many cases posters could easily have been improved by avoiding key errors. These include: a confused structure that makes it hard to find objectives and conclusions, too much text, small font sizes, poor graphics and colour clashes.

Q Do you have any rules?

A There are plenty of rules to follow when writing a poster but the most important learning I have made is based on the 60 second rule [1]. A busy reader should be able to get the main points of your work from the headings alone. Another important rule is to use clear, punchy titles to describe the main focus of the research. Good headings within the poster are part of the visual grammar that helps move the reader through the poster's narrative. Make the viewer want to know the punch line.

And finally...

Despite delivery of your best work ever, challenges on the day itself can undo all your efforts. Therefore:

- Prepare a short verbal narrative to describe your work using the poster as a visual aid.
- Arrive at your poster display site in good time and select what you wear with care [3].
- Take a poster hanging kit with you containing various different hanging options as well as a pen and notepad.
- Make sure that your poster is square and neatly hung.
- Have copies of your work prepared as hand-outs for your readers.
- Hang an envelope with the poster containing hand-outs, business cards and/or reprints.
- Some presenters augment their work with multimedia displays on iPads etc. Make sure you bring a selection of alternatives to fix your IT equipment to the display stand.

...and most importantly of all, stay with your poster during your assigned presentation time and actively engage your audience in discussion about your work.

One last point to share is that when you have displayed your data and discussed your findings with your peers you have already taken a giant first step on the road to developing a manuscript for peer-review publication.

References

[1] Hess GR, Tonsey KW, Liegel LH. Creating effective poster presentations. AMEE guide no. 40. Med Teach 2009;31:319–21.

[2] Boullata JI, Mancuso CE. A 'how-to' guide in preparing abstracts and poster presentations. Nutr Clin Pract 2007;22:641–6.

[3] Keegan DA, Bannister SL. Effect of colour coordination of attire with poster presentation popularity. Can Med Assoc J 2003;9:1291–2.

Helpful Resources

www.medscape.com/viewarticle/778852_3

www.ncsu.edu/project/posters/

www.colinpurrington.com/tips/academic/posterdesign

Block SM. Do's and don'ts of poster presentation. Biophys J 1996;71:3527–9.

www.kmeverson.org/academic-poster-design.html

www.sicb.org/newsletters/fa97nl/sicb/poster.html

McClendon KS, Stover KR. Tips for a successful poster presentation. Am J Health Syst Pharm 2014;71:449-51.

Next Steps

We created this Insider's Insight into Poster Presentations to share a few helpful pointers and key learnings that we have gained over the years. We can also share with you a poster template, which could serve as a great start to writing your own presentation.

I hope you found our guide useful. If you would like a copy of the free poster template, or would like further help or advice on writing your presentation, please reply to the original email, or contact me at the email address below.

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