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Seduction in the Poster Session



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A conference poster session can be a golden opportunity to network one-on-one with the scientific bigwigs in your field—assuming, that is, that you can get them to notice your poster in the first place.

Unfortunately, that can be a tall order. Invariably, says Colin Purrington, creator of one of the few [online poster-making guides](#) out there, you'll present your board in a loud, congested room with bad lighting. You'll be sandwiched between a poster about a breakthrough cure for cancer and another describing the mating preferences of extraordinarily cute [red pandas](#). Meanwhile, the top scientists in your field will be making a beeline for the wine-and-beer mixer in the next room.

What I wouldn't give for some visual-communication training, you're probably thinking right

about now. Unfortunately, design resources for academics are hard to come by, and the only [book devoted to posters](#) is woefully outdated, with lengthy discussions on the appropriate uses of glue sticks and straightedges.

But don't despair. You can make a poster that'll stand out from the crowd and stop thirsty scientists in their tracks. Here's how:

Planning makes perfect.

First, check the conference guidebook. The guidebook will typically tell you how big your poster should be (the most common size is four feet wide by three feet tall). And it should include a list of the sections—introduction, results, materials, methods, acknowledgements—you should include. (One note on sections: Don't forget to include your contact information!)

Gather all your materials and carefully consider the message you want your poster to convey. Make an outline and summarize the key points in 100 words or less. Then, before you sit down at your computer, create a pencil-and-paper sketch of where each section will fit, and how you'll place your figures and photos. Having a storyboard in place will make it much easier to transfer your poster to a digital format.

Learn the basics of layout.

A good poster layout should do three things. First, it should provide a “visual hierarchy.” That is to say, it should offer a logical path for your reader to follow. Size, color, and contrast can all help make the most important elements of your poster stand out. Are your section titles larger than the rest of your text? Are your most important sections associated with figures or photos? (Don't scrimp on images. This is a poster, after all.)

Second, every element of the poster should be lined up on an invisible grid. I find that a three-column grid with a large center column works well (templates for this and several other layouts are available [online](#)). Nothing will lose an audience quicker than a confusing layout, and nothing will trigger sudden-onset OCD like a misaligned figure.

Finally, a good layout should let it breathe. Leaving an inch or two of space between sections may feel like a waste of valuable real estate, but it'll instantly turn a cramped and crowded poster into a more-inviting read. (You'll thank me later.)

Size matters.

Pithy headlines are a must. The title should briefly convey the takeaway message of your poster, and should be catchy enough to draw an audience. Compare the two example titles

below.

Title 1: Effects of Permafrost Thaw on Plants in the Boreal Forest

Title 2: Permafrost thaw releases plant-available nitrogen in the boreal forest

The second example is much clearer; it is written as a complete sentence and the imprecise word “effects” has been replaced with a specific action. Note also that the second example is written in sentence case, not in title case or all caps. Sentence case is preferred in poster headlines.

In terms of size, aim for a title that spans no more than two lines in 85-point font. This will seem enormous on a computer screen, but it’ll look just right to a viewer standing six feet away.

Compact, cogent writing should fill the main body of the poster as well. Space is limited, and you don’t want to make your audience work any harder than they have to, so use bullet points and short sentences to highlight essential information. These will make your poster a lot easier to read in a crowded auditorium.

Use color, but don’t abuse it.

A hot pink poster might be attention getting, but it’s also hard on the eyes. And it’ll make your poster difficult to read. Choose contrasting colors for your text and background. But avoid using green text on a red background—which will render your poster nearly unreadable to passersby with red-green color blindness, a group that will make up nearly 10 percent of your male audience.

The most effective posters generally stick with three colors—a text color that approaches black, a background color that is nearly white, and an accent color. Sites like [Adobe Kuler](#) can help you pick a palette that perfectly matches your photos and figures.

And if you’re feeling particularly ambitious, dress to match your poster! One [study](#) showed that presenters who wore colors that complemented their posters received more than twice as many visitors as those who wore clashing colors.

Ban Comic Sans.

Focusing on typography might seem somewhat obsessive, but a good or bad font choice can make or break a poster. Word art, drop shadows, and so-called designer fonts, like Comic Sans MS, are no-nos for academic conferences. Simply put, they don’t convey a professional vibe.

Instead, pick one serif font (those are the fonts with little “feet,” or serifs, on each letter, like Times New Roman) and one sans-serif font (e.g., Helvetica or Calibri), then stick to those two complementary typefaces throughout.

The rule used to be: Use sans-serif fonts for titles and serif fonts for body text. But in recent years, that’s begun to reverse, and multiple permutations are acceptable. The only hard-and-fast rule is to pick one of each and use them in complement.

Select the right tools for the job.

Oddly, while Microsoft PowerPoint seems to be the software of choice for academic poster design, it’s not ideal for most print media. I can see the appeal—most people already own the program. But it was designed to project images in dimly lit rooms, not to print them on a page, so colors that look good on screen often don’t look right in print. Furthermore, the toolbars and animations aren’t tailored for your intended use.

If you plan to make more than one poster, it’s worth taking the time to learn one of the many other programs that are custom made for laying out print media. On the pricier side is Adobe InDesign or Illustrator (and competitors like CorelDraw, QuarkXPress, and OmniGraffle). But free and open-source software like [Scribus](#) and [LaTeX](#) will also get the job done. These programs allow pixel-perfect control over your layout elements, superior color handling, and a user interface that is tailored for print media.

Ask people to edit your poster.

Once you’ve completed your poster, ask your friends to critique it. (Helpful hint: Graduate students respond well to free food.) The more people you can get to edit your poster, the better. And don’t forget to print a draft, so you can be sure that your colors and figures look okay.

For those with thicker skin, the Flickr community [Pimp My Poster](#) allows anyone to submit a poster for anonymous critique online.

While you wait for your edits to come in, you should prepare a five-minute oral presentation to accompany your poster. You may never have the chance to use it (many poster visitors would rather chat than listen to a speech), but it’s a good idea to have one up your sleeve just in case. Also try to anticipate common questions and practice answering them in a few sentences.

Alas, you didn’t find the cure for cancer, and your images of otolith rings will never be as cute as pictures of pandas. But knowing the basic guidelines of good poster design means you’ll be able to produce one that will turn heads, one you’ll be proud to hang in the halls at your home

institution—at least until the next conference.



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She is the author of [The Scientist's Guide to Poster Design](#), which features tips and tutorials for making academic posters.

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