

# Designing a Research Poster With Impact

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Congratulations. Your research has been accepted for the poster session at a prestigious research conference. But wait! Not as a paper but as a poster? Now what do you do?

## STARTING UP

"The first principle of composition . . . is to foresee or determine the shape of what is to come and to pursue that shape" (Strunk & White, 1979, p. 15). The basic shape or design of your poster presentation will be determined by the guidelines for conference presenters. The extent to which you will be able to pursue or develop that shape will depend upon the time, money, and resources available to you.

Start by reviewing the set of guidelines or criteria usually included in the letter inviting you to participate in the poster session. If you have not received these guidelines, telephone or write for them immediately. Specific criteria may vary from conference to conference; however, the questions to which you will need answers remain the same. We recommend that you ask the following questions of the conference organizers.

### *Poster*

What are the size limitations for the poster?  
Are there any format restrictions?  
Can audiovisual equipment be used?  
Do you need to present all the specifics of your study?  
Will your abstract be included in the handouts for conference participants?

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<i>Display</i>	What is the size of the display room area?
	How early can you set up your poster?
	Are you assigned a specific place for exhibiting your poster?
	Will the poster be freestanding, attached to a bulletin board, or placed on an easel?
	Do you need to remain with your poster during the entire poster session?
<i>Audience</i>	Can your poster be safely displayed throughout the conference if left unattended?
	Who is the audience?
	How many conference participants are expected?
<i>Miscellaneous</i>	What travel arrangements are suggested?
	Will you be reimbursed for your travel expenses?
	If you will be driving to the conference, is parking available near the poster session site?
	Will lodging be provided?
	Are you expected to pay the registration fee for the conference?

In the process of obtaining answers to these questions and reviewing the guidelines, the basic shape of your poster presentation will begin to emerge.

The actual shape your poster presentation will assume is partially dependent upon the factors of time and money. These factors influence what you will be able to create. Regardless of the available time and money, do not skimp or take shortcuts so that you sacrifice the quality of your poster. Aim to produce a quality poster that will leave a favorable impression in the mind and eye of the viewer.

In terms of time, you will generally need to allow from six to eight weeks to produce your poster presentation. When planning how to use this time, begin at the date for the presentation, count back to the present, and examine your other scheduled commitments. Recognize that if you have a full schedule or if you intend to produce the poster yourself, you may need to allow more than the recommended time. If you decide to use outside resources to help in the design and production of your poster, such as a commercial copying firm or an expert in the visual arts, you will also need to consider their schedules and plan accordingly.

In addition to calculating the time available for preparing your poster display, you will need to estimate how much money you have to spend. You may be able to justify spending more money if you plan to use the poster more than once. Cost estimates for the finished product range anywhere from about 20 dollars to several hundred. Although adding to the expense, the services of a graphic artist or other experts in the visual arts are well worth the investment. Do not limit yourself to your own funds; if necessary, pursue additional funding sources.

Once you know the cost constraints, the time available, and the poster session criteria, the basic shape of your poster presentation will be clearer to you. Your next task will be to determine the message about your research that you want to communicate or show during the poster session. This is a critical determination, because your message will transform the basic shape into a poster presentation unique to you and to your research.

### SHOWING VERSUS TELLING

In a sense, your poster will speak on your behalf about your research to the conference participants. Because the participants will not be able to talk back and forth with your poster, it is crucial that your poster speak your message clearly, simply, and correctly.

In order for your poster to do this, you need to determine what specific message about your research you wish it to convey. Decide what you most want to tell the conference participants about your research, and state this in as few words as possible. For example, you may want to share your startling discovery, for example, "Guided Imagery Improves Wound Healing" (Holden, 1986), or that your research findings challenge existing assumptions, such as "Public Holds Positive, Not Negative, Image of Nursing" (Lippman & Ponton, 1986). Speaking with your colleagues might also help you to focus on the essence of your message.

Keep in mind that the message of your poster presentation will be primarily seen, not heard, by your audience. Although there are similarities between paper and poster presentations, the major distinction between them lies in the sensory channel that is accessed. The paper presentation is mainly auditory by nature, whereas the poster session is mainly visual. Therefore, rather than "telling," your research as you would when presenting a paper, consider how you could "show" your research during a poster session. When trying to show or visualize your research, you may become aware that concepts which are relatively easy for you to communicate in a paper seem difficult to translate into a poster format. Communicating your message effectively is contingent upon the accuracy of its translation.

To work on the translation of your message from the auditory into the visual mode, we strongly recommend that you consult with persons who have expertise in the visual arts or in advertising. Even if using a visual format is not a problem for you, do not rush to pull out the crayons and construction paper as a child might when preparing a poster for show-and-tell. Professionals in design, graphics, or advertising can be particularly helpful to you in

selecting materials and in preparing the visual presentation of your research findings. Do not risk compromising your work and possibly ending up with a second-rate poster by not contacting the experts. In the same way that paper presenters who are unprepared communicate a negative statement about themselves and their work, so do poster presenters who exhibit posters that look as if they were done haphazardly. Far too many posters displayed at research conferences demonstrate lack of thoughtful preparation and careful construction.

If you decide to consult with experts, do so as soon as possible. During your initial meeting, focus upon your message, its intended audience, and your style of operating. You should also discuss the possibility of augmenting your message through the use of a handout that would include other pertinent information about your research. In addition, provide some background information about your research area, the specifics of your study, its relevance for your audience, and its significance to nursing. This discussion will be helpful in deciding which basic design of a research poster fits your message and style. The traditional research poster contains all of the specifics of the reported study, including title, purpose, methodology, results, and implications. A less traditional approach concentrates upon one component of the study, for example, the development of the instrument utilized, or incorporates the use of audiovisuals. This decision is similar to choosing an appropriate design to test your research hypothesis. Remember, "choose a suitable design and hold to it" (Strunk & White, 1979, p. 69). Only an appropriately designed poster presentation will convey your message accurately.

When designing the poster, also think about the possibility that you might use your poster again. Because poster sessions are often fitting for reporting research in progress, a flexible design and layout will make it simpler to add to your poster once your research is completed. This will also provide room for changes based upon feedback from conference participants, or if the poster is to be used with a different audience at a later date. Even if the poster will not be used again, the transportation of it to the conference has implications for its design. Size limitations for the poster specified by the conference organizers may make it difficult to transport your poster by car, train, or plane. If your poster is too large to carry safely and comfortably, it can be constructed with hinges that will enable you to fold or collapse it into a manageable size. Another solution is to divide your poster into a few smaller sections that can then be quickly and easily reassembled at the conference.

The layout of your poster must reinforce, not detract from, the message that you intend it to convey. Points to consider here include the size, color,

number, and placement of the words, tables, graphs, and illustrations on the poster. Stressing any one of these elements more than the others can result in posters that convey qualitatively different messages.

If you have never presented at a poster session before, you might be inclined to include as much as possible on your poster. With this approach to layout, you run the risk of overwhelming and confusing the viewer, cluttering up the poster, and transmitting a jumbled message. Your poster would then visually look like a three-hour paper presentation might sound if jammed into 20 minutes. Rather than trying to put too much into too little space, "the approach to style is by way of plainness, simplicity, orderliness, sincerity" (Strunk & White, 1979, p. 23). A poster session that is done with style communicates a positive statement about your research.

A related consideration is how to get the conference participants to select your poster from among the rest for viewing. Essentially you want the participants to be attracted to your research exhibit. Unlike a paper presentation in which you have a captive audience, during the poster session you are competing simultaneously with other poster presenters for your audience. You could draw an analogy from the experience that you might have had at a smorgasbord. Because there are usually far too many foods and you need to choose the ones you wish to sample, you might base your selection on those that look the most appealing. Similarly, because the poster session is primarily visual, participants often choose the posters they wish to view based upon eye appeal. The following is a list of factors that affect whether your poster will be visually clear and appealing to the eye.

*Number of words.* The number of words is directly related to the size limitation for the poster. Do not crowd the poster with too many words. Too many words can overwhelm and tire the eye. Make every word tell (Strunk & White, 1979, p. 23).

*Style of type.* Use roman type. Limit italics and boldface type to the title of your study and to only those words you wish to emphasize.

*Size of print.* The title of your study should be clearly visible from all areas of the display room. The rest of your poster should be easy to read from the distance of 3 to 4 feet. Do not attach typewritten pages to your poster; these may be difficult and frustrating to read.

*Type of lettering.* Have the lettering for your poster done professionally, or if you do it yourself, use vinyl pressure-sensitive letters, rub-on letters, or stencils. Do not write by hand on your poster.

*Use of color.* For ease of reading, black type on a white background is suggested. However, the selective use of color can serve as an immediate draw for participants to your poster and enhance its visual appeal.

*Use of illustrations.* Tables, graphs, and photographs may serve visually to clarify your poster. Employ the services of a graphic artist for the drawing of any illustrations.

*Use of audiovisual materials.* Do not automatically limit your display to the traditional poster format. Consider whether the use of videotapes, slides, or other audiovisual aids will enhance the clarity and appearance of your presentation.

Because "the purpose is to engage, not paralyze the viewer's senses" (Strunk & White, 1979, p. 82), careful consideration must be given to all of these factors. Consulting with experts in the visual arts helps to ensure that your poster is visually clear and appealing to the eye.

Another way to attract an audience to your poster exhibit is to distribute a handout. This will bring conference participants closer to your poster and will serve to reinforce your message both at the poster session and after the conference is over. Naturally, the handout must be designed with as much thought and time as you spent on preparing your poster. You may want to seek the advice of design, graphics, or advertising professionals in this process.

If you use the services of these professionals, the next time you need to meet with them is after they have developed the first draft of your poster presentation. This is an important step in the design process, because at this point it is possible to see their interpretation of your message. Just as the artist brings a personal interpretation to the painting of a subject, so may the professionals designing your poster display. Their interpretation might be different from what you intended. For example, images they hold about nursing might color their ability to convey your message as you intend it to be conveyed. If the first draft communicates a message that is different from the one you intended, make the necessary changes at this time.

Additional meetings may be needed until you find the best fit between your message and your poster display. Keep in mind that just as revising is an integral part of writing, it is also an integral part of producing a successful poster presentation. Revision will be facilitated by ongoing dialogue.

The final meeting with the experts in the visual arts occurs just before the actual production of your poster. This meeting serves as a proofing session to verify that there are no further errors or omissions. Whereas the previous sessions were opportunities to make substantial changes, this session provides only the opportunity to make minor changes, for example, to correct spelling or typing errors. Several persons should be involved in this proofing process. The experts may have already proofed your poster presentation materials, but these individuals may miss errors that only the researcher or someone in the field would notice. Take the time to do this review slowly, carefully, and meticulously in a setting where you will not be rushed or distracted. When proofing, you must read word by word and letter by letter

to ensure accuracy. Arrange to have your poster and any handouts completed and ready for pickup at least three days before your departure for the conference.

Because the ultimate responsibility for how your message is communicated rests with you, it is vital that you take the utmost care with the production of your poster. The same care that you as a researcher took in designing and implementing your study should carry over to this process as well.

### GETTING THERE

"Getting there" begins no later than the day before your scheduled departure for the research conference. You might find it helpful to have prepared ahead of time a checklist of the items that you need to bring to the session. Anticipate that none of the materials promised by the conference organizers for your display will be there, and include thumbtacks, tape, a heavy-duty stapler, carpet tacks or lightweight nails, and a hammer on your list. If you are going to be using audiovisual equipment, add a heavy-duty extension cord and, if appropriate, an extra bulb for the slide projector.

Be sure to provide adequate time to package your poster materials carefully for transport. Use of an artist's portfolio case facilitates ease of transport and provides protection against the weather. If you are traveling by plane, do not put the case containing your poster with the check-in baggage because of the possibility of damage or loss. Instead, carry the poster on the plane with you; however, you will need to check with the individual airline about its regulations for carry-on luggage.

Finally, give thought to how you plan to dress for the conference. Consider that you will be an important part of the poster session and dress accordingly. The image of your research is projected not only in your poster but also in how you present yourself.

### PRESENTING YOUR POSTER

Leaving for the conference early and arriving early are necessary for several reasons. Leaving early allows enough time for you to find the conference site, the building housing the poster session, and parking. If you have not been assigned a specific place to set up your poster, early arrival also gives you a chance to select the most ideal location for your display. If

at all possible, plan to display your poster for the entire length of the conference. Having your poster on exhibit from the conference registration period on gives the conference participants more time to view your poster and thus increases the visibility of your research. However, you must determine beforehand whether your poster can be safely left unattended.

Arriving early also affords you adequate time to set up your display and to deal with any problems that arise. For example, you may find that the small table you requested for your handouts has not been provided. Or you may have expected that your poster would be displayed on an easel, but when you arrive you discover it needs to be tacked to a bulletin board. If you have planned ahead, you will have the additional time and materials to address these problems. Because some of the other poster presenters may find themselves in similar predicaments, do not hesitate to offer them your assistance. Offering this help can serve as a springboard for developing relationships with your fellow researchers.

Another benefit of early arrival is the opportunity it allows you to examine the other posters and how they are designed. This information will be useful to you later during the poster session, when you will be able to see which posters draw an audience and which do not.

After you have set up your poster display, dealt with any problems that may have arisen, and met some of your fellow presenters, take a few minutes for yourself. Remember that you are also part of the display, and take some time to get yourself ready.

Once the poster session begins and throughout, do not hesitate to engage conference participants in conversation when they approach your display. You should feel free to distribute your handouts and to ask participants if they have questions they would like you to answer about your research. Not only is the poster session a forum for communicating your research, but it is also a chance to begin networking with others involved in research. Because you will be making some valuable professional contacts, it is a good idea to have your business cards, a pen, and paper handy.

During the session, observe the interest of the participants in the various posters on display. Jot down which posters seem to draw the most participants and which do not. Later on you can compare these notes with your earlier observations of the exhibits. Also write down the comments that you receive about your poster display, so that you can use this feedback to revise your poster or to design future ones.



## ENDING UP

Congratulations. Your poster presentation has been a success. You have effectively communicated a message about your research in your own unique style. It has been said, "Style not only reveals the spirit of the man; it reveals his identity as surely as would his fingerprints" (Strunk & White, 1979, p. 68). Likewise, your poster presentation has left the fingerprints of your research and of you.

## REFERENCES

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