Visual Communication: Creating an Effective Poster

Based in part on materials from Krista Siniscarco of Hamilton College and Celia M. Elliott of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Much like a PowerPoint (or Keynote) slide show, a poster can complement a research paper and serve as a forum for public presentation. Unlike slides, however, a poster presentation facilitates interactive communication: posters invite a scholarly conversation.

Posters thus combine visual, oral, and written communication.

As when you’re writing an academic paper, when designing a poster you need to consider your rhetorical situation:

- What is your purpose?
- Who is your audience?
- What is the content you’re wanting to get across?
- What is the most effective format for expressing your content to your audience to achieve your purpose?

Purpose
Scholars and researchers present posters for a variety of reasons:

- To get results out to the scholarly community
- To get immediate feedback from peers
- To teach the audience something
- To learn something themselves

A poster itself has several purposes:

- To communicate ideas both verbally and visually
- To catch a viewer’s attention in order to engage them in the subject

Audience
Depending on the circumstances, your audience may be made up of at least three separate groups: the general public, academics, and academics with expertise in your subject area. As you prepare your poster you should ask yourself these questions:

- How much knowledge do they have about what you are presenting?
- What is your audience’s goal?
- Why would the audience be interested?

Research into audience reaction times has found the following estimates:

- 3 seconds to stimulate interest of the audience: the first 3 seconds will determine whether or not your audience will stay to read further.
- 30 seconds to convey overall concept
- 2 to 5 minutes to provide enough information for further explanation
Content
No one "perfect" amount of content works for every poster; the amount of information will vary based on your topic, your field, and your audience. One rough guideline is that the poster should have more information and detail than an abstract but much less information than a full paper. Since you want to balance text and images, you must make careful decisions about how much verbal content to include:

- Make your sentences as concise as possible
  ...but still use full sentences and active voice.
- Leave out extraneous information
  ...but do consider keeping one or two attention-getting details.
- Have your poster tell a "story" through narrative writing
  ...but also use text boxes and bullets to highlight results.

Format
Even more challenging than narrowing down your content is deciding how you want the poster to appear visually. The three most important considerations are

1. Balance of text and images
2. Orientation and layout
3. Design elements (font, colors, etc.)

1. Balance of Text and Images
Use text to explain such things as
- Your problem and hypothesis
- Your objectives and methods
- Your results
- The conclusions or applications to be drawn from the results
- Sources and acknowledgements

Use images, graphs, tables, and other visuals to
- Illustrate samples, subjects, equipment, or phenomena
- Convey data and results
- Show relationships
- Spark audience interest

Remember that posters are ultimately a visual medium: let images do much of the talking for you, while text works mostly as guideposts.

2. Orientation and Layout
One challenge of posters is that while, in the end, viewers will take a "readerly" approach—that is, they will want to read from left to right and from top to bottom—they will also be approaching the poster from different angles. You must design your poster in such a way that when seen anywhere from a distance, a poster's attractive and informative elements stand out, while when read from up close the information flows in a conventional order.
3. Design Elements

Fonts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Use Sans Serif Fonts for Titles and Headings</th>
<th>Use Serif Fonts for Text and Captions</th>
<th>Avoid Ornamental or Casual Fonts (and WordArt)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arial</td>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>Brush Script</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Optima</td>
<td>Baskerville</td>
<td>Comic Sans/Chalkboard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helvetica</td>
<td>Times New Roman</td>
<td>Lucida</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Colors

Dark colors behind yellow are more readable.
Bright colors with little contrast don't work well.
Light Backgrounds with darker colors read best.