

Visual Communication: A Preparatory Guide for Using Posters as a Medium for Scientific Dialogue

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Abstract

Poster presentations are an effective method of conveying scientific information in an interactive and non-threatening format. They are also a means of increasing authors' visibility and recognition in their field. The authors have presented a preparatory guide to minimize stress and increase poster presentation savvy at professional conferences for either the novice or seasoned professional.

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Keywords: Poster, professional presentation, visual communication, scientific dialogue

A professional conference is a venue for the exchange of scholarly ideas that are of valued importance to the sponsoring organization and its members (Hoffman & Mittelman, 2004; Ng, Hersey, & Fleshner, 2004). An integral part of these meetings are the presentation sessions, particularly poster sessions. Poster presentations are a means of communicating scientific information to a large audience in a relatively short period of time. They also can be perceived as an avenue for critical thinking, a requisite step when conducting scholarly research (Chabeli, 2002; Lohri-Posey, 1999; Moule, Judd, & Girot, 1998). As such, a presentation at these conferences will offer opportunities for disseminating preliminary research, sharing novel research findings, networking, and highlighting an interesting or innovative research methodology or project (Shelledy, 2004; Taggart, 2000). Optimally, they should also be considered as an entrée into the world of scientific publishing (Shelledy, 2004). This paper offers a preparatory guide for poster presenting, start to finish. The authors have identified six major areas from developing an abstract for submission through poster production and presentation for both students and seasoned professionals in the fields of health education and health promotion.

Abstract Development

When writing an abstract for conference submission, one of the first issues is to determine the purpose of the potential presentation. What precisely do you want the audience to know as a result of your presentation? Inevitably, having this in mind will guide your writing and preliminary ideas about poster construction. Next, before even putting words to paper, consider the word limit or word count. Many abstracts have a limit of no more than 250 words and it is imperative that authors adhere to these specifications. Often there are guidelines concerning the content and composition of the abstract. These include a background, methods, results, and conclusion section. Even if there is no specific requirement of including these headings, they remind the author of the structural elements that should be included in a thorough, yet concise abstract. Other issues related to abstract acceptance, although not directly related to the actual writing of the work, include data sharing and author notification. As a courtesy, if you are not the originator of the work (i.e., someone else is the principal investigator or was provided the funding to conduct the research) it is a professional gesture to ensure that you have permission to potentially publish an abstract

using their data. Also, if you will be submitting a multi-authored piece, don't assume that you have the other authors' permission. Again, a professional gesture would be to inquire about their interest in authorship for the work in question. They could either decline inclusion, or in some cases, strengthen your work and provide valuable feedback. Additionally, often times the principal investigator may have other authors in mind to be named on the work, or likewise have a specific demand for order of authorship. Although often perceived as external to the actual abstract submission, these issues should not be overlooked and can prove quite damaging if they are not handled until after the abstract is accepted and presentation is looming.

Poster Production

Once an abstract is accepted for publication, several decisions must be made. One of the first orders of business would be to get the board specifications. This includes the dimensions of the space and the limitations on the size of your poster as well as the board material construction so you'll know how to attach your poster. If the boards are cork, then push pins or tacks would be appropriate, however, if the board were Velcro®, either of these options would be less useful. Next, consider that presentation counts. As researchers, scientists, and health educators, we often think that the data is paramount, however, if no one is attracted to your poster, no one will have the data that you are so proud of sharing. Even more poignantly, a poorly designed poster may detract from the information the author wants to share (Taggart, 2000). Think size, color, format, and font in considering how to construct the poster. Along these lines, an error that many make is inundating the poster with text. Given that this is a visual representation of your work, just as you would have in a scientific article, tables, figures, and pictures are appropriate and should be considered to break up a sea of text. Consider that your audience will usually have been walking around for an extended period of time and the easier you can make it to get your point across to them, the better. Be clear, concise, and present only the key points (Taggart, 2000). Then, just when you think your poster is ready...it's not. Proofread, proofread,

and get others to proofread. There is nothing more embarrassing than to have your eye-catching poster riddled with typographical errors and mistakes. Although often underestimated, these things matter and can make a lasting impression. Once complete, make handheld copies of your poster to pass out to interested passersby. Include contact information should they be interested in conversing further about your work.

When your poster is ready for final production, take some time to shop for professional printing sources. The authors have developed posters both by hand and through professional services, and although there is a greater cost involved, the final expertly produced poster is one worthy of your hard earned dollars. The best places to start when researching your options are referrals from colleagues. Remember to think price and quality as you narrow your choice. Many of these companies offer services that you might not have considered such as laminate or glossy finishes, sizing selections, alternative text orientation, and convenient mailing options. When choosing a company, be sure to inquire about their format specifications (i.e., Microsoft PowerPoint®) and their ability to provide a color proof before production is complete. Finally, don't wait until the last minute. Undoubtedly, the author who takes time and care in developing their poster will be less stressed and more confident in the final product.

Transport

Once you have created your masterpiece poster, the next order of business is to ensure that it gets to the poster presentation in one piece. A great investment would be a plastic mailing tube. These are great as they will hold multiple posters and can be used again and again. Purchase one that will protect its contents from the weather elements with a handle for ease of carrying. You won't truly appreciate the importance of this tip until after you have had to make an 8:30 am presentation only to return to the hotel at 7:00 pm with several posters, conference paraphernalia, and bound abstracts in tow. Once you have purchased the carrier, label it. An easy way to do this is to attach your business card and/or lodging address and

presentation location. Also, be sure to have an electronic version of your presentation with you just in case the poster gets lost, stolen, or damaged. Many conferences now have printing services on site for this reason in particular. If traveling by air, carry-on is key (Taggart, 2001). Save checking it as luggage for the return trip home.

Setting Up

Before leaving for the presentation, pack the essentials. Carrying a notepad, writing tool, and even a pointer are good items to have to aid in your presentation. Also, bottled water or other refreshment (if allowed at venue) helps to prevent a sore throat. Even at the most relaxed of conferences, you should prepare to look as professional as your poster. Given the time and money invested in the event, look as poised as possible to seal the deal. Style and comfort are both important, and at the end of the day, the choice of the comfortable shoe will be greatly treasured. Plan to arrive 15 minutes before the scheduled start time to account for changes in presentation location or spacing. Always be prepared with materials to attach your poster to the board although they are almost certainly supplied at the conference. Don't be afraid to ask for help in setting up, especially when the poster is especially large. Better to ask for help in the beginning rather than regretting a torn poster in the end. Then get ready to smile and interact with the public.

Interacting With Interested Viewers

Since the effort was made to look the part, confidence should exude. This confidence should not only be in your appearance, but also in the presentation of the work. Be approachable

and be honest if you cannot answer a question. Feel free to distribute the handheld copies of the poster and ask viewers if they have any questions. Approach the presentation as an opportunity to share your work rather than a chance to defend it. Consider interest in your work as a complement and a possible opportunity for collaboration with other researchers (Crooks & Kilpatrick, 1998).

When it's All Over

Pat yourself on the back for a job well done. Don't re-live any moments where you might feel you could have done better or said something wittier. Bask in the fact that your preparation for the event eased your nervousness and made the time fly by. If there is another round of presentations after yours, be cognizant and courteous with the time and space. If there are lingering conversations, pass along your business card or invite the other party to help you disassemble the setup.

Poster presentations are an effective means of conveying scientific information in an interactive and non-threatening format. They are also a means of increasing authors' visibility and recognition in the field. The authors have presented tried and true methods to minimize stress and increase preparation for poster sessions. Admittedly, there are other, more detailed descriptions to aid with scientific writing, designing, and planning for a poster presentation available on the Internet and in numerous scientific publications. Nonetheless, the true key to a valuable and rewarding presentation is adequate planning and preparation.

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