

GUIDES TO UNDERTAKING RESEARCH

5.1 Conference Posters

Posters are a very important form of presentation at conferences and nearly all researchers will present one at some time. The following are some useful considerations for poster preparation and presenting.

A conference poster is typically a large sheet of card or other stiff medium on which is printed details and images describing a study and its outcomes. It is displayed pinned-up at designated sessions (with an author present at least some of the time) and is accessible for conference attendees to scrutinise at leisure. It uses a similar structure to a research manuscript, i.e., title, authors, abstract, introductory review, methods detail, data and conclusions, but these sections need to be short. It has a lower status than an oral presentation but is still an excellent way to communicate. It has many advantages over a short talk, in particular it is less ephemeral and allows in depth discussion in front of the printed-out details. Posters are ideal for attendees walking around to scan rapidly to find content of interest, especially for those less confident in English.

Personal discussions in front of posters can be pivotal in forming professional connections, and to engage with detailed criticism of the work. Like oral presentations, posters are often the prelude to full journal publication, but may simply be used to get expert feedback. As a learning exercise it is good to read some posters and assess how easy or hard it is to follow the work; however, note that posters, like talks, are an exercise in efficient communication, not in perfection.

Poster (or presentation) abstracts

These are submitted according to instructions long before the conference. They resemble in form a

manuscript abstract, standing self-contained without further information. Phrases like “these outcomes will be discussed...” are frowned upon. A committee assesses abstracts, with the highest scoring ones selected for oral presenting, the rest as posters. This certainly does not always reflect the quality of the work.

The three main types of poster viewers

Many conference attendees will have no strong interest in the subject of your poster and will walk around scanning the title and any striking images. Most people do not have the time to look at posters outside their own areas unless the conference is small. Attracting a general audience means the poster needs a short and informative title, minimal text and good figures (and nice images) that tell a clear story.

The second group of viewers are those with an interest in your area of work - they will take time to read summaries, introductions and figures, but ignore fine details. They should come away from your poster with a good idea of the study and the data.

The third group have a specific interest in what you have done so will take time to read everything, including methods and references that others will not bother with. They will mind less about small fonts with long sentences as they are motivated to read it. If you are there they will usually ask you to

explain the work to them and ask questions. Note, however, this group includes poster award judges.

Poster titles

These should be clear and in very large font (perhaps 60 point or larger) so can be read from a distance, and should be phrased tersely to describe the key points of the study and its outcome. Beneath it should be a list of authors and their affiliations in a less prominent size and style.

Poster summary

Include a copy of the conference abstract if you must (it will be in the conference abstract book) but it is usually best to include on the poster a short summary in font readable from about 2 metres, using curt and easily grasped sentences with simple and concrete aims and conclusions. Dot points may be useful here.

Poster introduction

This should be brief, large font and short sentences. It should state the nature of the problem addressed by your project, the broad sweep of current knowledge in the area and how you tackled it.

Materials and methods

No-one will read this unless they are really interested (unless perhaps it is a methods poster), so write this with as much detail as you wish but do not locate it somewhere prominent that distracts from your more important poster elements.

Data and analysis

A poster needs to be visual and with an appealing layout and handsome looking Results figures. Results should not be principally in text form, but graphs, simple tables, diagrams and images which are easy to digest. These should be well labelled, with legends on or directly under the images/tables themselves. Use colour for emphasis of key data features, and use summary diagrams if appropriate.

Conclusions and summary of results

Ideally use large text font and present as short, concrete dot points.

References

Keep these to absolute minimum in small text tucked away at the bottom since very few will need this information, but it is good to form a habit of referencing supporting literature.

Poster structure

The rule is to keep everything short (if in doubt, leave it out) and visually uncluttered. Keep the poster simple and easy to scan, and remember most attention will be on the upper part of the poster, so put boring detail (e.g., Methods and Acknowledgements) low down. If you want to divide the poster into columns make it obviously how to read it – left to right or up and down. It is often useful to group related materials in panels of subdivisions.

Discussing the poster

You will be asked about your poster (which is what you want) so take some time to prepare answers to simple questions. Particularly consider how to respond to a request from a viewer to “take me through the poster”. It is an opportunity to shine even if you have to keep repeating yourself to different people.

Conference etiquette

Stand by the poster (if possible) when conference organisers indicate, so those interested to do so can find you. This does, however, limit the time you can spend looking at other posters, so either arrange for a co-author to help or do not stray too far away. Ask those loitering at your poster if they would like you to explain the work to them, but do not hector. Never photograph other people’s posters without explicit permission as their work is probably unpublished.

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