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At a Glance[*]

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At a Glance*

A Stepwise Approach to Successful Poster Presentations

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> Words and pictures can work together to communicate more powerfully than either alone.
>
> William Albert Allard

Poster presentations have evolved since their 1974 début[1] and are no longer consolation prizes for abstracts not accepted for oral presentation.[2] To maximize the likelihood of success, consider the unique features of this visual aid. From the presenter's perspective, posters facilitate interaction in settings conducive to meaningful discussion. The presenter controls the content and can provide handouts for accurate recall. From the organizer's perspective, posters make efficient use of time and space. Attendees can peruse many offerings, quickly grasp essentials, and access experts for questions not appropriate in large venues.[3] This article provides a stepwise approach to capitalizing on these advantages, from abstract preparation to poster presentation.

PLAN AHEAD

Begin by researching meetings and calls for abstracts. Choose a main message suitable for the organization and limit the scope of that message. Invest the time required to prepare a good abstract. Make the abstract so relevant that it will be chosen by meeting reviewers. Make the title so alluring and

concise that busy attendees will search for your poster. Download submission guidelines from the organization's Web site. For example, *CHEST* abstract submission guidelines are comprehensive and include valuable information such as formatting instructions, sample structured abstract, and deadlines.[4] Carefully follow submission guidelines, especially word limits because automated software may truncate your submission.

After the abstract has been accepted, begin planning the poster immediately. Review guidelines because they differ among meetings. *CHEST* guidelines provide practical design tips and specify dimensions.[5] If guidelines are not available, ask for the dimensions and display method (*eg*, bulletin board or table top).[3] Regardless of whether meeting-specific guidelines are available, review posters presented at previous meetings.

ORGANIZE RESOURCES

Identify local resources, including coauthors, supervisors, medical writers and editors, printers, and others who can contribute to the success of your poster. Determine the budget and whether you will have the luxury of working with experts such as a graphic designer. If not, posters consisting of standard-sized pieces of paper can be very effective[5] and should follow the same process as professionally designed posters. Review institutional guidelines and define the stepwise process. Prepare a time-and-events schedule, allowing at least a week for each of the following: (1) drafting content, (2) reviewing draft content, (3) revising content, (4) designing the poster, (5) reviewing and revising content in layout, (6) obtaining final approval, (7) printing, and (8) Murphy's law.

Drafting content usually requires many revisions to incorporate reviewers' suggestions. To facilitate changes, choose user-friendly word-processing or slide-making software. After finalizing content, convert to graphics, illustration, or page layout software.

These programs have the advantage of rendering output that can be enlarged without distortion; however, they are more complicated and may require assistance from a graphic designer.

Select Content To Support Main Message

One of the most common mistakes is communicating too much. A poster is not a manuscript,[6] so select content judiciously. Begin with the essential elements that correspond to those of the abstract and include the following: (1) header with title, author(s), institution(s), corresponding author's contact information, and poster number; (2) Introduction or Objectives; (3) Methods; (4) Results; (5) Conclusions; (6) Acknowledgments, including role of sponsor; and (7) meeting name, location, and date. The most important element of a well-designed poster is the Results.[2]

Minimize text because busy attendees do not have time to read.[7] Omit all details that are not essential to the main message. Consider omitting the Abstract, Discussion, and References. The Abstract is redundant.[6,7] Crowded conditions and poster size impede matching superscripted numbers with references. If references are critical, place them in the handout or insert abbreviated references at the end of the relevant section.

Tempt the Eye

According to the 10–10 rule,[8] attendees spend only 10 s scanning posters as they stroll by from a distance of 10 feet. Use fascinating visual elements to entice attendees to your poster.[3,9] Unlike journals with rigid standards, posters can accommodate almost any type of visual.[2] Use graphs, photographs, drawings, illustrations, radiographs, paintings, and even cartoons to add interest. Use Tables sparingly and keep them simple.[3] Choose meaningful titles to interpret findings and obviate the need for text.[6] Write explanations directly on visuals.[7] Simplify graphs; omit grid lines and other unnecessary elements. Orient text horizontally, including labels for vertical axes.

Design the poster after finalizing content (Fig 1). Create a simple paper mock-up or use an electronic template. Insert fixed components first, such as headers and text. Save visuals for last and size them to fit available space. Use organizational cues such as numbered headers to guide the eye. Use visual grammar,[7] beginning with very large font for headers readable from 5 m and gradually shrinking to smaller font for text readable from 2 m. Limit the number of typefaces. For text, use serif fonts such as Times Roman so the "hats" on letters help the eye move to subsequent letters. To distinguish headers, use sans serif fonts such as Universal.[3,7]
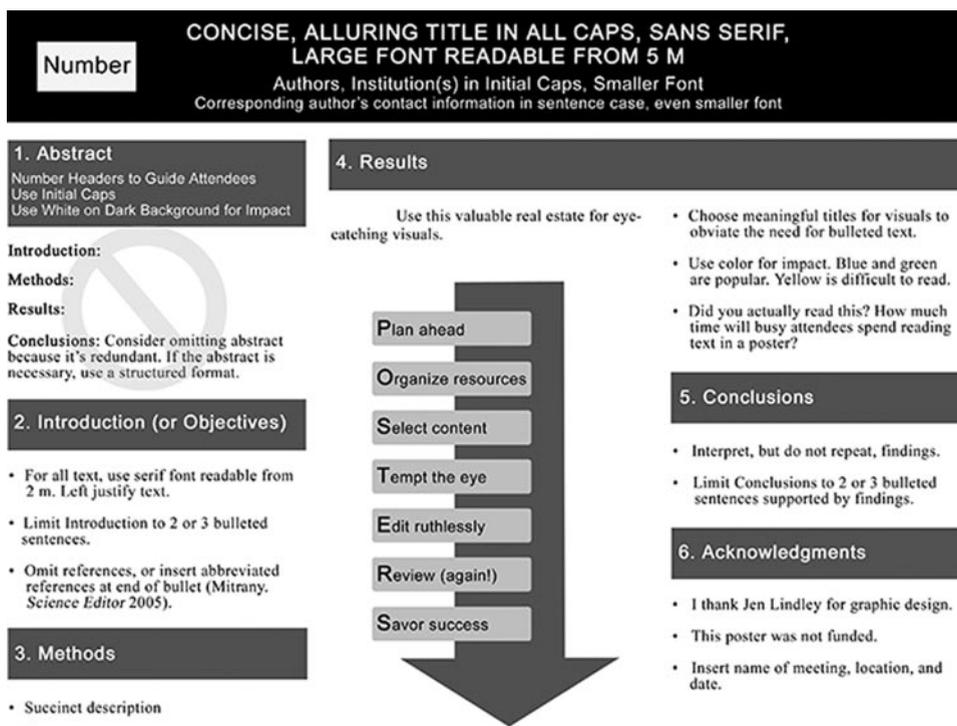

FIGURE 1. Sample poster design.

Sprinkle white space throughout the poster.[6] Resist the urge to fill voids with clutter that might discourage attendees from approaching your poster or obscure the main message.[2]

EDIT RUTHLESSLY

Limit text elements to ≤ 50 words.[7] Use phrases, not sentences, especially in the Methods. Use active voice and plain language; avoid jargon and acronyms. Use consistent wording, especially between text and visuals. Simplify language, reduce sentence complexity, and eliminate extraneous details.[7] Ensure that the main message is obvious and the content is self-explanatory. Invite colleagues to review the layout format and explain the main message.[6]

REVIEW, REVIEW, AND REVIEW AGAIN

Ask the printer for advice, such as how to select paper with a finish that will minimize glare in a bright room. Review a quarter-size proof before printing the full-size poster. Review for crispness; appropriate coloration; completeness of text, especially at the bottom of columns; logical line breaks; and absence of pixelation and artifacts, especially if slide-making software is used. If possible, wait a few days and then proof everything, including previously edited copy. Read the entire poster aloud and then read it backward—the reverse word order highlights errors that are easy to miss when read normally. Invite someone unfamiliar with the poster to review it.

SAVOR YOUR SUCCESS

Plan to enjoy the poster presentation. Practice brief tours of your poster.[3,7] Send the poster by a reliable courier to your hotel room or carry it on the plane. On the presentation day, arrive early and bring supplies such as pushpins.[5] When attendees arrive, be interactive and engaging. Remember that one attendee will attract others, so make eye contact with every visitor. Initiate relevant conversation by soliciting feedback that will be helpful for manuscript preparation or further research. On the other hand, do not badger attendees—allow them to read the poster and ask questions.[9] Help people remember you by providing business cards, handouts with additional details, and a pad for their written comments.[3,7] If you are successful, you will run out of handouts and attendees will request handouts by e-mail.

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Chest 2008;134; 457-459

DOI 10.1378/chest.08-1078

This information is current as of November 17, 2009

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