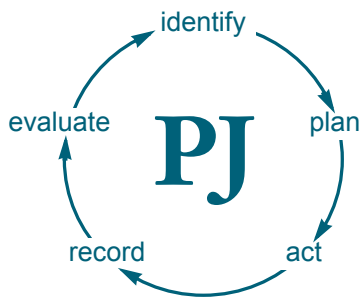


HOW TO PRESENT A POSTER

By Ruth McGuire, BSc

Sometimes a poster presentation is the most suitable method of communication.

This article gives tips on preparing and presenting posters



identify gaps in your knowledge

1. List three key features of a good poster.
2. What is the main difference between the classic and contemporary styles of poster?
3. List three advantages of giving a poster presentation.

This article relates to the Royal Pharmaceutical Society's core competency of "information transfer" (see "Medicines, ethics and practice — a guide for pharmacists", number 26, July 2002, pp105–6). You should consider how it will be of value to your practice.

Posters can be used for health education and promotion, but they are also one of the best ways to advertise the results of a research project. For example, at last year's British Pharmaceutical Conference in Manchester, over 250 science posters were presented. Like any presentation, preparation and delivery are key (*PJ*, 13 July 2002, pp63–65), but for poster presentations, consideration of additional details, such as how your poster should look, is required.

WHY A POSTER PRESENTATION?

Conference organisers might set time and space aside for poster presentations because they wish to create a setting in which research is promoted, but there may not be enough time for each research group to make individual oral presentations. For presenters, it is often easier to communicate complicated information by using a poster and answering questions than having to fit all the information into a 15-minute oral presentation. With posters, people can take their time digesting the information and those who are interested can spend as long as they like learning about a specific project.

Giving a poster presentation usually means that you will only need to speak to people who are interested in your work. Moreover, it is probably less nerve-racking than giving a formal presentation because you will be speaking to a smaller audience, and often, this means just having a friendly conversation. One disadvantage of giving a poster presentation is that unless you are funded, you might need to find sponsorship or have to meet the costs of travelling to the conference and accommodation yourself.

For the audience, the advantage of a poster is that, unlike a paper, information can be read quickly. Furthermore, posters create an opportunity for interaction. Conference participants can not only ask questions of the author but they can also share ideas and experiences. A disadvantage with posters is that participants cannot take the poster away to read at leisure as they would a research paper unless the presenter provides handouts. Additionally, during busy conferences, participants vie with others for viewing space and this has to be taken into consideration when designing the poster. But space is not the only issue. Some participants can monopolise a

poster presenter's attention and time, which makes it difficult for other participants to ask questions.

Nevertheless, well planned poster presentations offer a means of communicating research, and time invested in planning, designing and rehearsing a poster presentation will pay off.

PREPARATION

If your work has been given poster space at a conference, the first thing you should do is check the following details with the conference organisers:

- The size and shape (eg, portrait or landscape layout) of poster board that will be provided
- The mounting arrangements for the poster, eg, Velcro pads, pins
- The schedule for poster presentations
- The time allocated for setting up your poster
- Any particular requirements, eg, you might be required to follow a template

At last year's BPC, each poster was displayed for one of the three days, and the presenter was required to attend his or her poster for the last hour of the day. In addition, a discussion session was held and authors of selected papers were required to make two-minute oral presentations of their work.

TIME MANAGEMENT

When you decide that you are going to make a poster allow yourself sufficient time. You will need time to experiment with different layouts, to produce a working version, to test your poster on a small sample audience (eg, colleagues) and to make revisions. If you need the help of others (eg, a graphic designer to produce some of the headings and labels) you need to take account of this in your planning. Make sure you are aware of the deadlines of the colleagues you will be working with to produce your poster. For example, allow enough time for graphics and pictures to be produced.

HOW TO DESIGN AN EFFECTIVE POSTER

Before designing a poster, think about the posters you have seen. Are there any so memorable that even now, you can visualise them? Those were probably the posters that were planned well in advance,

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with a clear focus on both the message and the audience. The best posters use a good mix of text, graphics and sometimes pictures to convey a message. According to Henry Chrystyn, professor of clinical pharmacy at the University of Bradford, three features of a good poster presentation are clarity of data, bullet points and handouts.

Styles of poster There are two main styles of poster. The classic style is made up of a number of small (usually A4 sized) pieces that fit together. These pieces can be arranged over the display board and one advantage is that last minute changes can be made relatively easily (pieces can be added or removed). The pieces can be easily carried to the conference in a briefcase. One disadvantage is that the poster takes time to set up. The contemporary style poster consists of one large laminated card that can be rolled up. It can be put up quickly at the conference, but any mistakes you might spot at the last minute are difficult to correct.

Content The real test of a poster's success is whether it stands out from the other posters at the conference. A good poster will attract the attention of conference participants and make them stop to read it. But even if this is achieved, the poster should be self-contained and self-explanatory. If a presenter has to spend time explaining the contents of the poster, it has not met its objective.

Although you need to make the most of limited space on a poster, never pack it with text. Think of the key message you want people to take home with them and how you can best achieve this.

As with any other form of presentation, you need to consider your audience. For example, who will be attending the conference (eg, international experts) and what might be the level of knowledge of your field of research? Having established your potential audience, you need to select the essential facts and figures you want to communicate, leaving out any extraneous points. As you collate the information, follow the basic structure for any form of written or verbal communication: introduction, body and conclusion.

Structure Once you have decided on the message, use a logical sequence for the information. You could, for example, follow the usual structure by starting with an abstract then moving to the introduction, methods, results and conclusions. A typical poster will have some or all of the following components:

- Title
- Abstract
- Details of authors/presenters
- Aims or problem statement
- Method
- Data/tables
- Conclusions/summary
- Contact information
- Acknowledgements
- References

Easy-to-follow format Make text easy to read by grouping it into sections and using bullet points. Each set of data, table or figures should have its own heading in large type, which acts as a summary of the information that follows.

It is best to design a poster so that it is read in a number of narrow columns rather than in one wide column. This avoids readers having to move back and forth across the length of the poster as they read. Draw a sketch of your poster with columns to help you to visu-

alise how the information flows. Alternatively, use small cards to help you sort out ideas for arranging the content for the poster.

You can help your audience by using numbers or arrows to indicate the sequence that you want them to follow. Another strategy is to place predictions and results alongside each other. Remember that the audience is in control of a poster presentation, determining how and at what pace they will read the poster.



Posters are a good way to advertise your work

Title Use a title that grabs the attention of your potential audience and make sure that the words can be clearly read from a distance. The text for your title should be at least 3.5cm tall. You could include your name, credentials and organisation alongside the title.

Style of text Minimal text is most effective. Participants will not make the effort to read long sentences so keep your text short but concise. A poster is different from a paper — you do not have to write in sentences, and bullet points should be used where possible.

Write in the active rather than the passive voice. In other words, write “the data demonstrate that . . .” rather than “it can be demon-

strated by data that . . .” And be careful not to use abbreviations that few people will understand. Asking colleagues to edit your text can improve your poster and highlight mistakes you might overlook.

Presenting data Make data easier to interpret by using tables, graphs, pie charts or pictograms effectively. This means thinking about what the data mean and the simplest way in which you can express this. Bar graphs are good for comparing two or more variables. Stacked bar graphs can be used to show proportions, as can pie charts. Change over time is best shown by line graphs. Once you have chosen the most appropriate type of graphic, you will need to think about design. Using different colours is preferable to using different patterns. Make sure colours are used consistently if two or more graphs are to be compared. Do not use three-dimensional graphs unless you need to show three different variables.

References Only cite references key to your research.

Keep it simple Aim for simplicity and avoid clutter. The worst types of poster are ones that overwhelm the audience with data or text. Aim to reach a mass audience rather than a select group of experts.

action : practice points

1. Evaluate the next set of posters you see at a conference.
2. Consider submitting an abstract for the posters presentation at next year's BPC (2004). To get an idea of what is required, see the details for this year's posters at www.health-links.co.uk/bpc
3. Visit www.strath.ac.uk/Departments/CAP/poster/ Compare “classic” and “contemporary” poster styles and attempt the quiz.

evaluate

How could your learning have been more effective?
What will you do now and how will this be achieved?

PANEL 1: CHECKLIST FOR PREPARING A POSTER PRESENTATION

- Have you collected and checked details from the conference organisers about the space allocated for the poster, size of board, mounting details etc?
- Have you checked deadlines and schedules with people who are contributing to the poster?
- Have you checked the conference schedule to see when your poster needs to be attended and if you will be expected to give an oral presentation to support your poster?
- Does your poster have a clear “take home message”?
- Does the poster follow a logical, easy-to-read order?
- Is the final text size legible at a distance of 1.5 metres?
- Is the poster attractive — would you want to stop and read it?
- Have you produced a set of handouts to accompany your poster?

Effective illustrations A poster is essentially a visual medium, so the emphasis is on showing rather than telling. The adage “a picture tells a thousand words” is certainly true of posters and a good quality picture can make all the difference to a poster’s success. The image should dominate a poster and be supported with captions. Ask colleagues for feedback on visual aids during the design of your poster.

“White space” There should always be less text in a poster than there are graphics and illustrations. One suggested formula for the balance between text and graphics is to think in terms of 20 per cent text, 40 per cent graphics and 40 per cent space.

Font style It is best to keep the look of your poster tidy by using the same type face throughout. Bear in mind that many people find serif fonts easier to follow than sans serif fonts. Times Roman font has been found to be the most readable font so you could avoid experimenting with a variety of fancy fonts and choose this one.

Font size The text for a poster should be legible from a distance of around 1.5 metres. The usual recommended font size is 20–25 point.

Colours Bright colours might be eye catching, but use them judiciously. Too many colours can be confusing and make your poster look messy but two or three contrasting colours can look good. For a classic style poster use a mount board that contrasts well with the colours of your text and graphics. For text, black type on white or cream background is most appropriate.

Finishing touches You could finish off your poster with a laminate. It protects the surface but also gives your poster a professional finish. Panel 1 provides a checklist for preparing poster presentations.

REHEARSE YOUR PRESENTATION

Having said that a poster should be self-contained, you should still be prepared to answer questions from conference participants. You might also have to defend your research so do be prepared for participants who may wish to challenge your findings. Having done the research, you should know your subject well but you will need to put your explanations into words, ie, try to develop an oral summary of your poster. A useful tool is to try to explain different points in fewer than 30 words. Try not to use jargon — not everyone you talk to will share your research background. You need to be able to give clear and concise explanations. You will probably be asked the same questions many times, so try to anticipate some questions in advance and practise your answers.

Because poster sessions are intended to be interactive you have to be prepared not only to answer questions but also to engage in discussion with your audience. Depending on the nature of the conference, you may be expected to give a brief oral presentation to

PANEL 2: TIPS FOR POSTER PRESENTATIONS

- Go to the conference prepared for emergencies, eg bring both Velcro pads and pins to put up your poster
- Soon after registering at a conference, visit the room where your presentation is to take place and find your space, so that if you realise you need drawing pins instead of Velcro strips you have time to find some or if the space is not what you expected, you have time to make adjustments
- On the day of your presentation, allocate time to put up your poster
- Make sure your outfit is professional, yet comfortable
- Wear comfortable shoes — you may need to attend your poster for a few hours
- Stick a photograph of yourself on the poster board so that people interested in your work know who to look for if you are away from your poster or busy talking to someone
- Greet everyone at your poster confidently and offer to answer any questions
- Stand to the side of your poster so that you do not obscure the view of your audience
- Bring handouts or photocopies of your poster
- You might find it useful to supply your contact details either at the end of the poster or in your handouts
- If you decide to bring handouts, make sure you bring enough to distribute both during the unattended times when you are not standing alongside the poster and the times when you are present
- Spend some time before the presentation going over some of the finer points, such as an intricate method, the literature you refer to, and the statistical tests you used (and why)
- If you find yourself unable to answer a question, you could offer to contact the person with the answer after the conference
- Try not to allow one person to take up all your time — give them the option of contacting you after the conference
- Do not ignore anyone at your poster
- Even if you are explaining something for the 50th time, stay enthusiastic — remember that for the listener, it will be the first time
- Even if there is not as much interest in your poster as there is in others, stay until the end of the session — you never know who might turn up

support your poster, so prepare what you intend to say beforehand. It can be useful to perform a trial run in front of colleagues.

AFTER THE CONFERENCE

After a conference, always take time to reflect on how the presentation went. For example, did you have any sticky moments (eg, questions you could not answer)? And how would you deal with such a situation if it were to happen again?

SUMMARY

Further tips for giving poster presentations are given in Panel 2. Although conferences can be tiring, try to enjoy yourself. Attending a conference is not only a chance to show off your work, but also a great opportunity to catch up with former colleagues and make new contacts. It could even lead to interesting future career opportunities.

WEBSITES FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

- www.gmu.edu/departments/writingcenter/ppt/
- <http://lorien.ncl.ac.uk/ming/Dept/Tips/present/posters.htm#content>