

Creating strong academic posters

Academic posters are visual displays of a research project. They are typically used at academic conferences. Several posters are hung in a room and the conference attendees walk around to view them. Conference attendees will often stop to discuss the poster with its creator who is standing nearby. Many conferences have an award for the best poster presentation. In addition to conferences, you can find many academic posters hanging in university hallways.

You can use many different software applications to design academic posters. The most common software used includes Adobe InDesign, Word or Publisher, and PowerPoint.

The main elements of a good poster

The text

- The text of the poster should be between 300 and 800 words. It is a common mistake to have too much text on a poster.
- The title should be short and catchy.
- All text copy should be extremely concise. You risk losing your audience with any additional words. It is not a good idea to just cut and paste from a paper onto a poster. This is a different medium and requires a different way of communicating. Use shorter sentences than you would in an academic paper.
- Include the elements that are common in your discipline. For instance, a science poster often includes purpose, methods, results, and discussion.
- Include references and acknowledgements.
- Include your name, your collaborators' names, your email address, and your institution.
- Use headings and bullet points to make your information more readable from a distance.
- Make sure to proofread your text well before you add it into your visual design.

Visual design

- Common size is 36"x48" or 90 cm x 120 cm
- Use your design to highlight important information.
- Include visual elements like graphs, charts, and photographs. This is a visual medium, so you should try to use visual elements even if your discipline does not use them in papers. You can find open-licensed photos on Flickr. (Search for creative commons photos)
- Remember that your important information, especially your title, should be readable from at least 2 metres away from your poster.
- TIPS: Include your photo on your poster so that visitors know who you are in a crowded presentation room. Also include your institution logo for a professional look. Logo files are usually made available by the institution.
- FANCY THINGS: Consider having business cards or a postcard version of your poster to share with the people who are interested in your poster. Have a one-page summary of your research for someone to keep. You could also incorporate some fancier items into your poster presentation such as a digital slide show. (Use a digital photo frame to do this.)

Steps to a good academic poster

1. Find good models. Get to know the genre of the academic poster by finding good examples. Google "good academic posters"; ask your professor; pay attention to the prize-winning entries at conferences.

2. Write your title and text and choose the visual elements that you would like to include on your poster. Make sure that any visual elements like photographs are high resolution or they will become pixelated.
3. Choose fonts. Make sure that your fonts convey your message and are suitable for your audience. Only use two types of fonts or your poster will seem visually crowded. You can use different sizes of these two fonts. One trick is to use a non-serif font for the titles and a serif font for the body text.
4. Choose colours. You need to choose background colours, colours for your fonts, and likely one or two accent colours. Make sure your colours also convey your message and are suitable for your audience. Use online colour palette pickers to help you make scientific choices about what colours work best together. Try <https://color.adobe.com>. Also watch that there is enough contrast between your background colour(s) and your font colour as this will make it easier to read for people with vision impairments.
5. Choose your layout. Most academic posters use a three-column or four-column layout. You may be able to find templates online that provide these layouts for you. When you create your layouts on your computer, think scientifically! Measure distances precisely and use grids, guides, and rulers. This precision is the difference between amateur and professional designs.
6. Draw thumbnails. Try out several different designs by drawing thumbnails (small, hand-drawn facsimiles). It is usually easier to try out layouts in this way, rather than to mock them up on your computer.
7. Consider the four principles of visual design:
 - a. Contrast. Things that are different should look different. For instance, titles should be much larger than body text. Use contrast to highlight the important elements of your poster. Create an organizational hierarchy for your poster.
 - b. Repetition. Things that are the same should look the same. Headers should be all the same size, colour and placement. Body text should be the same.
 - c. Alignment. Use grids and guidelines to make sure that everything on your poster is aligned precisely. Nothing should be placed arbitrarily. Avoid full and right justification. Use centering sparingly.
 - d. Proximity. Use proximity to show that things belong together. For instance, don't put a visual element far away from the text that it belongs to.
8. Focus test your poster. Make sure that you ask for feedback on your poster design. Try to simulate the environment of a conference when you ask for feedback. Hang your poster on a wall and ask someone to stand 2 metres away. Watch how their eyes travel across your poster. Ask them what they notice first. Is this the most important thing on your poster? What do they have difficulty seeing or understanding? Are your figures and photographs large enough?

Computer skills for good poster design

Poster design will be easier if you learn some basic skills on your software. If you don't know how to do the following, do an Internet search for the skill together with the name of your software, i.e., "create a colour palette in PowerPoint for Mac."

- Change the paper size and orientation
- Create a colour palette
- Add a background
- Set up a grid
- Use guides and rules
- Add a text box
- Change margins in a text box
- Use bullets in a text box
- Add a shape
- Transform a shape in proportion
- Align and distribute shapes and text boxes
- Add an image
- Change the size of the image without changing its proportions
- Add a border or frame to an image
- Save your document as a PDF