



Poster Power: Meaning and message

There are times when you might need to develop a poster for use in the classroom or as a teaching tool, to report on your research findings at a conference, or to promote an upcoming event. Creating a poster may also be specified as the outcome for a student assignment task. These notes are designed to raise a number of the issues you will need to consider and provide some tips for preparing clear, concise and good looking posters.

What is the poster for/about?

Having a clear understanding of the purpose of your poster and any particular, or specified, requirements will help you make informed decisions during its creation.

Who is the intended audience for your poster?

- Why are you making the poster? Is it to inform students or to support your teaching in class; have you set it as an assignment outcome; are you preparing it to report or promote your research findings at a conference; or do you need to produce it for a work related purpose? The purpose of the poster and the intended audience should always be considered when making choices during the poster making process.
- Will the poster have a single or one-off use or will it be used multiple times? Is it expected to have a long or short term presence - is it going to be hung for a day or two, or a month or more?
- If you are preparing the poster for presentation at a conference, are there any requirements specified by the conference organisers e.g. stipulations about size, orientation, or for hanging?

What type of poster is it?

- What is the nature of the poster? Is it to highlight the key points of an issue or topic, advertise or promote a product or choice, make a statement, or to invite or encourage involvement or engagement? Are you using it to explain a process or to present data or to outline your approach to, or the results of, your research?
- The type of poster you need to produce will give you clues about the 'tone' of the poster and how to present your information - will it be informative or emotive, creative or factual, visually busy or quite lean?
- Will the poster need to travel with you or be posted to a different location? Can it be carried flat or does it have to be flexible enough to be rolled up?

What message are you trying to convey?

- What information needs to be conveyed? What details need to be included? What can be left out? Only include sufficient content to say what you need to say and avoid using irrelevant information or decoration.
- How can you best display the information? Should you use a text based or a graphically dominant design?
- What will be the focal point on your poster to get the viewer's attention? Techniques include using the structure of the design, some dominant text such as the title, or a visually arresting graphic or picture.
- Are there charts, graphs, tables or images that need to be included? Do you have to include any corporate logo or branding, sponsor logos or copyright acknowledgements? Are there rules to observe in using them?

Setting up the poster file

Setting up your poster correctly, to obtain the expected output at the end of the process, will save you from wasting effort along the way.

Understanding the requirements

- Are there instructions which you need to follow or limitations to adhere to? Is the poster size and orientation pre-defined, is the use of certain fonts specified, or are there particular restrictions for the use of images?
- How will the poster be printed? Are there any factors you need to consider when you set up your poster file?

Preparing draft specifications

- A good idea, before you start, is to get out pen and paper and prepare a draft of the requirements for your poster. You can draw in the size proportions, orientation and margins, and show required items such as a logo, footer, creation date. Think about specifying a base font to use and what colours might be suitable.
- What post-printing processes are required? Write down any mounting, laminating or hanging requirements.
- If the poster is thematically related to other resources, what common elements are used to make it look part of the 'set' - colours, images or text styles or a combination of them?
- Viewing conditions will need to be considered when planning your poster. Will the poster end up on a notice board with lots of other competing posters, will it be relegated to the only available surface in a classroom, or if you are presenting at a conference will it be hung in the lobby of a venue or in a dedicated display space?

Setting up the file

- Once you have a clear idea of what your poster requirements are you are ready to set up your poster file. Start by establishing a working folder and related subfolders, i.e. for images and other source documents.
- Decide what program to use to create the poster - InDesign, PowerPoint, Publisher, Word, etc.
- Make sure the program is 'targeting' the right printer for the final output of the poster. This will mean you are able to choose document sizes larger than A4 or A3 if you need to.
- Using your poster draft as a guide set the basic parameters of the file - its size, margins, any layout guides or grids, and your base font and colours.
- It is a good idea to use the date or a number (or letter) sequence in the file name for your poster file and to save regular versions - this way you can keep track of your changes and go back to previous versions if need be.

Adding text and images

When you are ready to start adding the content to your poster, take the time to make sure you have the text and any accompanying images or charts in a state or format that will require little or no change after they are included. Also start to think about how the pieces might fit together and support the flow of the information.

Compiling your resources

- Identify and collect all the text and image sources that are relevant for your poster. File these into the appropriate folders so that when you need them they are easy to get to.

Developing and refining the content

- Start by preparing an initial draft of the text that you will use on the poster. Don't worry about how it looks at this stage just focus on what needs to be said and how you might order it.
- Take this initial draft and then review and refine it - looking at ways you could rearrange or revise sentences to say things more clearly. How can the structure be used to make your message more easily understood?
- Structural elements will vary depending on the type of poster but can include such things as: a title; an abstract; an introduction, preamble or hypothesis; analysis; discussion and conclusion. Remember to follow any specified instructions, e.g. for conference posters, where certain structural elements may be required.
- If you plan to use graphical elements such as images, charts, tables or graphs, now is the time to prepare or refine them ready for inclusion. If necessary for final printing, you may also need to convert image files to CMYK format and a suitable resolution for successful output. Check with your print supplier if unsure.
- Image file formats that are better suited for high resolution printing include TIFF, PICT, JPEG and EPS. Remember, for printed images, the more information in the file (or higher the resolution) the better it will print.

Initial placement and layout

- Now that you have your content in reasonable shape you can begin adding it to the actual poster file, giving thought to an initial layout. Will it flow across and then down the page or in columns across the page? Where will the title or main focus element be placed - above, below or in the middle? If required, where will you place the logo, references or acknowledgements? But don't fuss too much at this stage, just get all the bits you need added into the file.

Arranging and styling the content

Once you have all the items that you need on the poster file you can begin the creative process of laying out and styling the poster into its final form. Play around with the placement and formatting of the elements, then step back from it, review your progress and make any modifications you think are appropriate. You can also get a second opinion from a colleague or leave it for a day or so and then have a fresh look at it when you return to it.

Arranging the content

- Consider the visual arrangement of the contents, the flow of the information, any 'pull quotes' or blocks of highlighted text, and any backgrounds and frames.
- The further away the viewer will be from the poster the larger key elements will need to be for them to be read easily, so make your most important statement or attention getting element the most prominent.
- Identify what needs to be emphasised and try shifting elements around on the poster or resizing them to help create visual interest and to guide the viewer through the content.
- Can you group items together or 'float' them over, or alongside, other elements without losing the message?
- Once you have decided on the position of some elements on the poster you can then use these fixed elements to guide you - aligning newer elements along common edges or centres as appropriate. But remember not to overdo it or it will quickly turn into a visual muddle.

Formatting the text

- Review the base font (body text or 'normal') you chose when you set up the file. Is it a clear, readable typeface for your poster, does it suit the content of the poster? If not, consider choosing another base font.
- You can establish heading styles using colour, shading, varying font sizes and even special effects, such as drop-shadows, to provide visual cues to the viewer and to help break up the content into more manageable pieces of information. Make your headings cascade effectively to help reinforce the reading order.
- You can use text styling to distinguish or emphasise elements, e.g. by using colour, italics or bolding, or by adding bullets, but make sure not to overuse text styling otherwise it will lose its impact.
- Elements such as an introductory paragraph or a pull quote may be formatted in a larger font size, while you will more likely find footnote text, references and acknowledgements formatted in a smaller type size.

Refining the poster design

- Are there changes you can make to remove any clutter or to embellish the poster to improve its overall coherence and visual integrity? You can use such things as lines (or rules), shared background colours or common icons to tie elements together.
- Review the text to make sure the flow of information is both clear and logical. Are there sentences or phrases that need to be rewritten to make them more understandable? Have you repeated content unnecessarily or included irrelevant information that can be removed to maintain focus on the message?
- It is always useful to get a friend or colleague to look at your poster and give you their feedback; they will often find things that you have become 'blind' to. Assure them that they can give you their honest feedback - you don't always have to use it but sometimes they will notice things you have completely overlooked.

Outputting the file for printing

When you are finally happy with your poster (or time has run out) you need to make sure your file is ready for printing. You want it to print according to plan and come back looking like what you were expecting. You can minimise unexpected results by checking a few things before you send the file. If you are producing an expensive poster you can ask for a proof copy to check that things print as expected before you commit to the final print.

Printing methods and suppliers

- How do you want the poster printed? Depending on your needs you might want the poster printed on paper, cloth or a more rigid media such as cardboard or plastic corflute.
- Who can you get to do it? Depending on the size and any special requirements for your poster you might be able to get it printed in-house or locally, or you might need to work with a professional printer or signage supplier to get the product you want.
- If you are new to getting posters printed, ask around and see if any colleagues (or staff from other areas) have suggestions for suppliers.

Preparing the file/s

- If you are using a professional supplier you can check with them to see if they have any particular printer settings that you need to factor in when generating your final output file.
- How should the file be set up for the best results? Should it be prepared for RGB or CMYK output? Do you need to include any supporting files with the final poster file or should you supply it in PDF format?
- If there are images, backgrounds or rules that 'bleed' over the edges of the poster will you need to include bleed marks and crop marks so the printer knows where to trim the edges?
- How will you get the file to your printer/supplier - is it small enough to email, do they provide online upload options, or will you need to supply it on a USB drive or burnt onto a CD/DVD?

Finishing and hanging the poster

- Don't forget to factor in any post printing finishing and hanging considerations when arranging for the printing of your poster. Can your supplier do these or will you need to source a secondary supplier? What might you need to do yourself to make sure your poster is ready to be hung, whether in the classroom, at a conference, or somewhere else?
- Does the poster need any trimming - to create even margins or to account for elements that bleed off the page? Do you want to have the poster laminated to protect the surface and to extend its longevity? If made of a cloth or fabric material do the edges need to be sewn to stop them from fraying?
- How will you hang the poster? Does it need to have eyelets added, will you need to add Velcro strips, or will you need to purchase and install a hanger? Cheaper options might include pins or bulldog clips and string.
- Finally, you will also need to consider such things as how to carry your poster if you need to travel with it or how to post it to another venue. When the poster is not in use how will you store it to make sure it looks at its best when you need to reuse it? How often can the poster be reused before the information is outdated?

Summary

A thoughtfully constructed and well designed poster will have a greater visual impact and help carry your message more clearly to the intended audience. Its carefully planned construction and an understanding of the requirements for printing will help ensure the smooth and successful production of the final poster.

Selected links

University of Adelaide, *Academic Posters*, Writing Centre Learning Guide, viewed 5 March 2014

<http://www.adelaide.edu.au/writingcentre/learning_guides/learningGuide_academicPosters.pdf>

University of Adelaide, Festival of Learning and Teaching: Interactive poster session [web page], viewed 5 March 2014 <<http://www.adelaide.edu.au/festival-lt/posters/>>

University of Adelaide, Brand standards [web page], viewed 5 March 2014 <<http://www.adelaide.edu.au/brand/>>

University of Adelaide, University Copyright Information [web page], viewed 5 March 2014 <<http://www.adelaide.edu.au/copyright/>>

More Internet resources

Search using combinations of terms such as 'preparing a conference poster' and 'creating an academic poster'. (Leave off the quote marks though.)