

How to display your work effectively

In certain disciplines you may be asked to prepare a poster to summarise research you have done, often as part of a teamwork exercise. The main aim is to develop your communication skills, including how you select and present the content and are able to discuss your work with others.

Key topics:

- Researching and deciding on content
- Designing your poster
- Constructing and setting up a poster
- Defending your poster

Key terms

Abstract Peer Peer assessment Point size Poster defence
Rhetorical question

The idea behind a poster display is to present a summary of research or scholarship in an easily assimilated format. Poster sessions are common at academic conferences, particularly in the sciences – they allow many participants to report findings or ideas within a single session and help people with similar interests to meet and discuss detailed information.

The concept has been adapted for undergraduate work for several reasons.

- It allows you to present the results of your work to tutors and fellow students.
- It provides a good end point for teamwork (Ch 20).
- It makes you focus on the essence of the topic.
- It develops your presentational skills.
- It allows tutors to observe your verbal communication skills.

Any or all of these aspects may be assessed as part of the exercise. Look into the way marks are divided before you start so that you can allocate your efforts appropriately. If peer assessment is involved, you may wish to discuss this openly at an initial team meeting.

Definition: peer assessment

This is where members of a class assess each other's work. For a poster presentation, members of a group may assess each other's contribution as part of the team, and/or members of the class may judge each other's posters.

The advice presented here will assume that your poster is part of a team exercise where you have been asked to look into a specific aspect of the subject you are studying. The same principles will apply if it is a solo effort, for example if you are reporting the results of a research project.

→ Researching and deciding on content

It might be a good idea for your team first to do a little independent study, so that everyone can gain a general picture of the whole topic. At some point you will want to meet up to decide on the exact focus of your poster, and perhaps allocate specific research tasks for each member. At this stage you should only be thinking about the specific aspects of the topic you feel you need to cover, rather than precise wording. Even seemingly narrow subjects will have scope for different approaches. Although a striking 'take-home message' is important, you should also bear in mind the need for visual impact in your poster when making your choices. There are certain components included in most posters, however, as detailed below.

You will normally be allocated a space to set up your poster (typically 1.5 metre wide and 1 metre high) and, although this may initially seem a large area to cover, you will probably have to select carefully what to include. This is because your poster will need to be legible from a distance of 1 metre or so, and the large font size required for this inevitably means fewer words than you might otherwise prefer. When thinking about content, therefore, it is best to assume that space will be limited.

Typical components of a poster – a checklist



- Title:** phrased in a way that will attract readers' attention
- Author information:** names, and in the formal academic type of poster, their affiliation
- Abstract or summary:** stating the approach taken and the main conclusions
- Introduction:** providing brief background information essential for understanding the poster
- Materials and methods:** describing experimental or field research, background theory or historical overview
- Results:** key findings or examples
- Conclusion:** giving the 'take-home messages' of your study or project
- Acknowledgements:** stating who has helped you
- References and sources**

→ Designing your poster

The key design principle for your poster is to generate visual impact. It needs to stand out among the others in the session and provide a visual 'hook' to draw a spectator towards the more academic content. This can be achieved in several ways:

Examples of imaginative poster design

- A poster about forest ecology where the text elements are presented as 'leaves' on a model tree.
- A study of urban geography where the poster has the appearance of a street map with aspects written within each building.
- A physiology poster where an organ like the liver is drawn at the centre, with elements attached to it via arteries and veins.

- a striking overall design 'concept' related to the topic;
- effective use of colour or a prominent colour contrast between the background and the poster elements;
- a large image, either attractive or horrific, at the centre of the poster;
- an amusing or punning title;
- some form of visual aid attached to the poster, such as a large model related to the topic.

For convenience, most undergraduate posters are composed of A4 or A3 sheets, or shapes derived from them. These 'panels' will be attached to the main poster board, usually by drawing pins or Velcro pads, and their size or shape may place a constraint on your overall design - check the overall dimensions as soon as you can, to work out your options for arranging these sheets.

The next important aspect to decide is how your readers will work their way through the material you present. Each panel will be read left to right in the usual way, but the route through the panels may not follow this rule. Various options are shown in Figure 60.1. Whichever you choose, it is important to let your readers know which path to take, either by prominent numbering or by incorporating arrows or guidelines into the design.

The ideal text size for your poster title will be about 25-40 mm high (100-170 point size) for the title, 15-25 mm for subtitles (60-100 point) and 5-10 mm (25-40 point) for the main material. If you only have an A4 printer at your disposal, bear in mind that you can enlarge to A3 on most photocopiers, although this may restrict you to black-and-white text. Linear dimensions will increase by 1.41 times if you do this. Once point size and panel dimensions are known, you can work out a rough word limit for each component. When members of the team are working on the content, they will need to bear this limit in mind. Besides being succinct, your writing style should make it easy to assimilate the material, for example, by using bullet points and sub-headings.

Group style

We all have our own styles of writing and it is important that you bear this in mind when composing the text, so that idiosyncrasies are ironed out and the overall style is consistent.

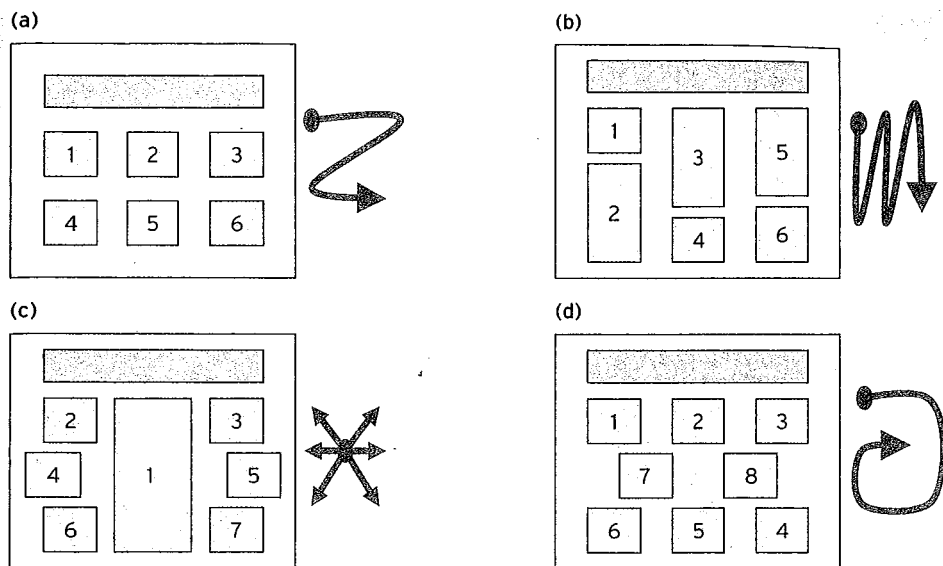


Figure 60.1 Options for laying out a poster. The numbers and arrows indicate the route taken by the reader, while the deeper-coloured bar at the top would contain the title and author details.

→ Constructing and setting up a poster

At an early stage, you should draw a diagram of your poster, mapping out the main components to scale. You may also wish to create a mock poster to the exact dimensions to gain a better idea of what the final version will look like.

Each part will need to be printed or copied according to your design brief. Using panels as described above makes it easier to construct the poster as a series of independent components and to bring these to the poster session for final assembly. They can be attached to your board directly or pasted on to card first. You may also wish to laminate each component, or cover it in clear plastic film. A photocopying specialist (see *Yellow Pages* under 'Copying and duplicating services') may be able to carry this out for a charge.

→ Defending your poster

The poster 'defence' for undergraduate work mimics the poster session at a conference where delegates mill around the posters, quizzing the authors about their work. These sessions can be very stimulating for all involved, and collaborations and job offers may result.

If your poster exercise involves an element of defence, it will probably take the form of a 5-10-minute question-and-answer session with your tutors. Expect probing questions to find out how much knowledge and understanding lies behind your presentation, not just what you have selected to display.

Questions about your poster that you should be ready to answer



- Why did you select this topic?
- Who did which part of the research?
- Who thought of the design?
- Who made up the components?
- Can you give me further information on . . . ?
- How does this finding relate to . . . ?
- What does this graph or image mean?
- Where next for this topic or research area?
- How might you improve your poster?



Practical tips for creating better posters

Use the poster title effectively. A two-part title can be used to draw the reader in – the first part being a ‘hook’ and the second giving more detail. The chapter titles in this book are examples of this approach, but there will be scope for more humour in your poster title, perhaps through a pun on the subject material.

Check out the font sizes you plan to use. Print out a specimen sheet and stand 1-1.5 metres away. You should be able to read the material easily from this distance. Copy some random text (for example, from a website) on to a sheet at the same font size and carry out a word count to gain an idea of what your word limit will be for each component.

Make sure that your poster is able to ‘travel well’. You should think about how you take it from the point of construction to the display venue. The components should be portable and packaged in a weather-proof way.

Remember that ‘white space’ is important in design. An overly fussy presentation with many elements covering the entire area will be difficult to assimilate. In this case, ‘less can be more’ if it helps you to get your central message across.

Consider colour combinations carefully. Certain colours are difficult to see against others and some pairings may be difficult to distinguish for those who are colour-blind (for example, red and green). Bold, primary colours will attract the eye.

Use imaginative materials. A visit to a craft shop or a do-it-yourself store might give you some ideas. For example, you might see a piece of fabric or single roll of wallpaper at a cheap price that could provide an interesting background.

Use language to draw the reader in. For example, if the titles and sub-headings are given as a series of rhetorical questions, a casual viewer will naturally want to read the text to find out the answer.

Don’t provide too much detail. Keep the wording sparse, and be prepared to talk further about matters raised in the text during the poster defence.

Use a handout, if you have too much detail to cover. If you've done lots of research but have to cut some interesting parts out of the final design because of space constraints, consider giving readers a short handout to cover these aspects. This should contain the poster title, author names and contact details.

State your 'take-home message' clearly. Leave your reader in no doubt about your conclusions. You could, for example, list them as a series of bullet points at the end.

Work as a team when answering questions. Be ready to support each other, filling in if someone dries up. However, all members should know the fundamentals of the topic, as any group member may be expected to respond.

GO And now . . .

60.1 Find out the dimensions of your poster space and draw this out to scale.

If you copy this sheet your team can use it to sketch out possible designs that will stand a better chance of working.

60.2 Have a critical look at research posters in your department. These are often put up on display after they have been used at a conference. You will probably find them well presented, but some may be rather detailed and formal in appearance. Learn from good and bad aspects of what you see.

60.3 If you are worried about defending your poster, hold a mock event.

Prime a flatmate or friend with a series of likely questions (see the checklist on page 435), then try to answer them as you would to your tutors. As well as getting you used to speaking aloud about your work, this should help remove any nervous feelings. It will also allow you to find out what you *don't* know, in time for some quick revision.