

Suggestions for preparing a poster – my personal view

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1. A poster is a means for attracting attention, starting communication with the person standing next to it. It therefore need NOT pass on ALL the information. It is not an article in a journal.
2. Writing a poster is an exercise in advertising - there are dozens if not hundreds of other posters around. No one can read all of them completely. People are scanning most of them for 5-20 sec max and move on. The challenge is to attract them to read everything in our poster, which should take them about 2 min, rather than let them go after the 5-20 sec scan, and then interest them enough to engage in conversation with the person standing next to the poster.
3. Not only there are hundreds of posters, but there is noise around, people eating and drinking and old friends are met. People have hard time concentrating under those conditions. Therefore, all the help has to be given to them - no long paragraphs. Not much details in one lump. Lot's of visual information. BIG FONT.
4. Often there is a group of 4-5 people reading the same poster, so they need to open a little circle around it so they don't block the visual line of each other. So they stand about 2-2.5 meters from the poster. This is another reason why the font needs to be large. I would say 36 is ideal. 34 is also tolerable. 30-32 for "small print" that is less important, if there is anything like that at all.
5. Because the area is limited and the font has to be large, and space is needed for the figures as an important visual element (see above), there is hardly space to write anything! Thus it is important to save space by writing in concise sentences (even if they are not complete, grammatically correct sentences). Points (bullets, or numbered sentences) are more like headings, and can be shorter than sentences in a paragraphs. Also they are easier to read in an atmosphere of distraction around. Most recommended for the conclusions.
6. Space should be saved also by avoiding any possible repetition. An item that appears in the figure (e.g., p value) should not appear in the text. Unimportant elements should be avoided (e.g., some statistics, such as t-value in a t test). Often even the name of the statistical test has to be omitted due to lack of space, and just the p values appears. There shouldn't be both a title to a graph and a figure caption that repeats the same information.
7. People who have hard time to concentrate (that's our audience!) tend to look at figures and read figure captions only. So we can trick them and put a lot of information in the figure captions. The best way is if we can describe methods under the appropriate figures of the main methods, the study area description under a map; the results will appear in short paragraphs (2-3 lines) under appropriate figures and not in a separate paragraph. Then the only paragraphs that are left are the conclusions and goals (both better written as points / bullets) and the introduction, which may be a paragraph, but short and with the main points only.

8. The short introduction should draw the reader to the enigma we want to solve, to a lack of something in the current knowledge, and the goals will show the reader that actually this poster is going to solve the current gap in knowledge. The reader will then feel compelled to read the rest, just out of sheer curiosity (if done properly).

9. Cut down on acknowledgements - just the essentials. Same with references - only 2-3 most essentials.

10. An abstract is often a luxury that we don't have space for. In most cases, there will be an abstract in printed form somewhere in the proceedings, so there is not real need to write it on the poster, because it is a repetition, and we lack space.

11. The order of navigating among the elements in the poster should be clear to the reader - be it from top down in one column and then in the second, or be it in any different order - the reader shouldn't get lost and shouldn't read the methods after the results. Sometimes, when it is not clear, we may place large numbers near each box to direct the order of reading. If it can be avoided and still the order obvious it is better, because it saves space, but don't allow the readers to get lost - they will move on to the next poster before reading everything in yours.

12. To improve attractability of a poster - it's good to place nice and large pictures of organisms, landscapes etc. It's a good investment in space.

13. Due to the lack of space, it's a good idea to make sure there is little empty space wasted between different elements in the poster.

14. Although many people like to place a faded picture in the background of the poster, I feel that it is usually a distracting element, gives a feeling of a cluttered poster. Even if it is faded enough to not interfere too much with the reading. Readers can't really see what's in the picture, and they will waste time (out of the 20 sec they scan the poster) and attention trying to see what's the background picture, instead of paying attention to the details in the poster.

These are my personal views. I am well aware that some people will not agree with me. I actually see hundreds of posters that do not follow these suggestions, but fortunately, I can spend just 5 sec on them before I move on...