**PREPARING FOR A SYMPOSIUM**

By Cindy Barrios

Scientists are known for staying long hours in a laboratory, collecting and analyzing data to discover or improve the understanding of their particular field of study. However, none of this data and understanding could be useful unless scientists take the time to share their research with their peers. Therefore, talking and discussing research findings is extremely important and a skill that all scientists must acquire. Poster presentations are a great opportunity to share results and communicate with fellow scientists. A well-designed poster that is both organized and professional can make the difference between a lackluster showing and a standout appearance. In this article, I will describe some tips to guide you into designing and preparing for an amazing poster presentation. We will be discussing the content, flow, and organization of a poster in order to increase visual appeal.

DON’T USE TOO MANY WORDS

Be concise! Before creating your poster, take a few minutes thinking about the way you would like to share the story of your research. You have limited time to share the information, therefore, your poster should be mainly a summary of your findings. Create a bullet point list of the main ideas that you want to share with your audience instead of writing full sentences. Figures and images are great to share large amounts of information with such limited space.

STRUCTURE

Throughout the process, think about the story that you want to tell your audience. It is vital that you present your ideas in a logical order and layout the concepts that make it easy for your audience to follow. Think about the information you want to convey and the space each item requires to get your point across. For example Introduction, Material and Methods, Results, and Conclusion it’s a common way to break down your poster. Remember, most people read from left to right, top to bottom (Fig. 1), this will help your reader know where the information starts and finishes.

 

DO NOT BE AFRAID OF NEGATIVE SPACE

Let your poster breath! By this, I mean, do not fill every possible space. Not only does it make it visually overwhelming for the audience, but also, it makes it harder for you to get your point across. Use the space strategically to draw attention to the most important point of your research (THE RESULTS).

BRING UP THE HUE

Color can be a game changer for your poster, but sometimes, less is more. Try to stick to 3 to 4 colors. You can use tools such as ColorDrop to configure a palette that goes well together. Avoid patterns or dark hues for the background, not only because it takes more ink for the printing process but also because it is distracting for your audience to focus on your figures and context. One more note regarding your color palette, the way your poster looks on your computer does not mean that is how it is going to look once you print it. It all depends on the quality of the printer, but most often, the quality of the printer and color might fade during the printing process. So keep this in mind when choosing a color pallet.

FONT AND SIZE MATTERS

It is vital for you to create content that is legible for your audience. Font and size really matter to make it easier for your audience to read the information you are trying to convey. The font size should be visible from 6’ away and no smaller than 24 pt, this includes the small captions below the figures. Try to avoid cursive font types that are both harder to read and can be too cluttered for a poster. Furthermore, there are thousands of font generator software that you could use on your computer to generate unique font types that might look outstanding on your computer. However, unless you installed the same font software generator on the computer that you will be using to print your poster, most likely the font on your computer is not going to look like the printed version. In summary, try to avoid complicated font types and small font size and use a font that is universal and accessible on any computer, such as Times New Roman.

DO NOT IGNORE YOUR TITLE

Your title is the first thing that will draw audience attention. Most conferences consist of hundreds of poster presenters and it would take too long for a scientist to visit every poster available. Scientists skimp through the titles to find the poster that presents information they are interested in learning. Therefore, make sure you think about a good title that conveys your message which will draw scientists that are more involved and interested in your topic.

DO NOT JUST ADD FIGURES TO YOUR POSTERS

Many times I have seen figures and images that do not include a title or caption describing the image or figure. In larger conferences, many posters are on display for several days for people to visit. With that being said, you want your poster to include as much information as possible so a scientist can understand the gist of the data even when you are not directly presenting the information. Imagine your poster as a large business card, with all of your contact information. All the details and information included in your poster should be delivered in a professional matter.

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

You could have the best poster available, but you also need to work on the way you will communicate your scientific knowledge with your audience. I personally get very nervous speaking in front of an audience, especially when the audience includes experts in the field. But just remember, you did the research and you know more about your data than anyone else in that room. Prior to the conference, try to practice presenting the poster in front of friends, colleagues, and mentors so you can build confidence. The more you practice, the easier it will be to present in front of strangers.

BE PROFESSIONAL AND WALK THE TALK

Dress appropriately! Think about this space as a work environment. Jeans, t-shirts, shirts without collars and footwear such as flip-flops, sneakers, and sandals are not appropriate for business attire. Use your good judgment and professional taste and dress up in business attire that is appropriate. Beyond just dressing up professionally, also behave in a professional manner. Remember, you are presenting your work to other professionals, which might lead to a strong network opportunity for future collaborations. The connections you create in this setting might lead you to more opportunities in the future, take advantage.

FINAL TIP

Relax! Former UC LEADS scholar, Dr. Ryan Miyakawa once said that he learned the most by observing other students presentations to gather ideas. It takes time to master the skill of poster presentation. Take every opportunity as a lesson until you find your personal style.

 \*I’m adding the poster I presented at Leipzig, Germany below!

