Tips, tricks, & suggestions for creating and presenting scholarly posters

Cory Christopher, Director, UC Forward & URSC, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, Ohio 45220-0115
cory.christopher@uc.edu, (513)556-3256

Updated 2/13/15
# Table of Contents

What are scholarly posters? ................................................................. 1

Poster Logistics ................................................................................. 1

  Where to print .................................................................................. 2

  PowerPoint ....................................................................................... 2

  Format ............................................................................................... 2

  Colors & Background ...................................................................... 2

What information to include ............................................................. 3

Sections .............................................................................................. 3

  Title ................................................................................................. 3

  Abstract .......................................................................................... 3

  Background ..................................................................................... 4

  Objectives ....................................................................................... 4

  Materials & Methods ...................................................................... 4

  Results ............................................................................................. 4

  Conclusions .................................................................................... 4

  Future Directions ........................................................................... 5

References .......................................................................................... 5

The Experience of presenting a poster .............................................. 5

  Networking ...................................................................................... 5

  Making a first impression ............................................................... 5

  Answering & asking questions ....................................................... 5

After the conference; The Follow Up .............................................. 6

Contacts ............................................................................................ 6

References .......................................................................................... 7
The Concept

What are scholarly posters? There are many names to describe scholarly posters. Depending on what school you attend, or what field you’re studying, posters may be called research posters, scholar-to-scholar posters, scholarly posters, etc. Regardless of the name, they all have the same purpose: presenting new information about a topic in a graphical, concise, and self-explanatory way. Similar to any posters, the immediate objective of a scholarly poster is to communicate something interesting to the public. Scholarly posters, however, are used to share exciting and new information about a particular field of study. Ultimately, scholarly posters are intended to spread new ideas, data, methodologies, hypotheses, and interpretations about a topic within a particular field of study. In this way, scholarly posters share the same objectives as oral presentations.

Putting together a professional quality scholarly poster (hereafter, referred to simply as “poster”) may initially seem easy when compared to the months or years of work that went into the research being presented. Yet, even for seasoned researchers, it is not easy to encapsulate an entire research project onto 15 square feet of paper. As wide format printers become more affordable, poster size is no longer a limiting factor, and from experience I’ve seen posters getting bigger and bigger (and harder and harder to read). Yet, despite the increased accessibility of technology to print posters, it is still not easy to design a poster that presents your work graphically in a succinct, exciting, cohesive, and engaging way. To alleviate some of the stress involved with making posters, I thought I would share some poster-making tips that I have learned from viewing literally thousands of research posters over the years. These tips assume you have a basic knowledge of PowerPoint.

The Logistics

To print or not to print There are two broad categories of posters: (1) Tri-folds and (2) Printed. For professional presentations, including the annual URSC conference, you should opt for printed posters. Tri-folds are good for in-class presentations and for use when robots take over the world’s computers and leave us with nothing but cardboard and sharpies. Otherwise, just plan to print your poster. Check with your advisor to see if your department offers free or discounted printing. Most copy stores can print posters, and research advisors often pay to have them printed. There are a variety of options for getting your poster(s) printed, and each will vary by price and the amount of time needed to complete your order. Be sure to plan at least a week for getting your poster printed.
Where to print your poster: If your department or college does not provide printing, there are a couple of on-campus and off-campus options:

1. The College of Criminal Justice, Education, and Human Services Library: [www.libraries.uc.edu/cech/Services/poster-printing.html](http://www.libraries.uc.edu/cech/Services/poster-printing.html)

2. The University’s Communication Services: [www.healthnews.uc.edu/communications/printing](http://www.healthnews.uc.edu/communications/printing).


4. Staples (limited sizes): [www.staples.com/sbd/content/copyandprint/posters.html](http://www.staples.com/sbd/content/copyandprint/posters.html)

Making a poster with PowerPoint | The easiest way to make a poster is to use PowerPoint. There is a PowerPoint poster template on the URSC website to get you started. The template is already formatted to 45” x 45”, the maximum allowable size for your poster. If you ever need to change the size of your poster (for other conferences), you can simply do this by going to “Page Setup” in the “Design” tab and simply change the size settings. If you’re familiar with PowerPoint, you will be comfortable making a poster. The only difference is that you will only use a single PowerPoint slide to create your poster. Because the one slide is so large, you will likely need to use the zoom feature to view and edit different parts of the slide.

Formatting | Depending on where you present, the maximum allowable poster sizes can vary widely. Refer to the conference website for details. Posters for the University of Cincinnati’s URSC conference should be no larger than 114 x 114 cm (45 x 45 inches). Font should be legible from ~ 5 meters away. To achieve this, use at least 20 point, plain font (e.g., Times New Roman, Arial, Tahoma). Maintain a 2.5 cm (~1 inch) margin on all sides to ensure your text or graphics aren’t cut off during printing. I also suggest printing your posters on matte (not glossy) paper, just to ensure your text and graphics aren’t hidden by glare. Don’t forget to include your name and contact information on the front of your poster!

Colors and Background | PowerPoint allows you to choose your backgrounds from a variety of colors, patterns, and gradients. You can even choose to use a background image instead of a single color. From experience, I will urge you to stay away from using photographs as your background. They’re typically too busy. I also discourage patterned backgrounds for the same reason. Instead, find a soft solid color or even select a toned-down gradient color (or two). If you MUST use a photo, then do the following: insert the photo as an image (don’t select it as a background) and then expand the photo to fill the entire poster. Then, click the photo, and use PowerPoint’s “Re-Color” tool to “Wash Out” the photo. But again – stick with a solid color and save yourself a headache.
As for other colors, make sure that the different components of your poster are consistent. If you make the “Background” section header 20 point blue font, then the “Procedures” section header should be the same. If you have multiple graphs, make sure that the colors are consistent in those, as well. For instance, if you are using red lines to represent “Subject A” in graph 1, then “Subject A” should also be red in graph 2, etc. The short story is that you want to be consistent with your use of colors, and don’t use so many that you give the viewer a migraine. Importantly, consider your audience. I would argue that designers are more appreciative of color than are biologists (and I’m a biologist!).

The Information

What to include and what not to include | Think back to when you wrote your first research report. Chances are, your reports contained the following: Title, Abstract, Background, Purpose/Objectives, Materials/Methods, Results, Conclusions, Future Directions, References. You also probably included a few graphs and tables of the most important findings. Posters are no different, except that you want to keep posters less “texty”. Recite this as you make your poster: “Less is more.” In most cases, attendees have many posters they want to read, and they may shy away from posters with too much text. It’s tempting to put everything you know about your topic on the poster (after all, you worked hard on it!), but resist this temptation!

Also think about how you will present the information. Most posters are structured to read from top left to bottom left, then top center to bottom center, then top right to bottom right. It helps to think of your poster as being composed of 3 columns, each of which are red from top to bottom (Figure 1). Again, this is just a basic framework, and many experienced researchers will have their own unique way of structuring their posters. Check with your advisor to see if he/she has a preferred format or other creative ways of displaying information.

Recite this as you make your poster: “Less is more.”

Title: The title should extend across the entire top edge of the poster. You may want to leave room in either top corner for a departmental, lab, or funding agency name/logo. Be creative and think of creating a title that gets people’s attention. Viewers should be able to read your title from across the room (or nearly so), and you want them to think, “I have to go see that poster!”

Abstract: In most cases, the organizers of the conference at which you are presenting will ask you for an abstract of your poster. This abstract is then published in a conference proceedings.
booklet that attendees can read and select specific posters to view. I suggest not including the abstract on the poster, unless you are asked to do so.

**Background:** Your introduction/background section should be no more than 1 or 2 paragraphs. The entire introduction should be no more than 250 words. Some of the best posters I’ve seen use 50 words or less for their background. Some people successfully use bullet for their introductions, but I personally prefer an introductory narrative. The point is to give the viewer precisely the amount of information he or she needs to understand your project, but no more.

**Objectives:** A short bulleted list of reasons for WHY you did the work. What did you hope to achieve? You can speak both to the academic (e.g., filling gaps in the cancer literature) and personal (e.g., you are passionate about opera) aspects of the project.

**Materials & Methods / Procedures:** The methods will depend on the project. Occasionally, you can list all the methods in a few bullet points. Other times, you may need to take a narrative approach like in the introduction. If your methods are particularly complicated and the viewer doesn’t need to know every single detail, then consider using a few bullet points that outline the major steps, then bring along some copies of a Word document that goes into more detail. If anyone is interested in hearing more about your methods, you can simply provide them a copy. If you think your methods cannot be appropriately explained in a few bullet points or in a succinct paragraph or two, ask your advisor if a supplementary Word document is more appropriate.

**Results:** Your poster should not present every piece of data that you collected, or every finding that you made. Most likely, your research took months (or years), so you will need to choose which of your findings are most important, and present those. Focus on creating large, clearly legible graphs & tables that illustrate your findings. You can also include a few bullet points to highlight the most important findings. If necessary, use subheadings to organize your results. I many cases, the results will dominate the poster, so don’t get nervous if you find that 50% of your poster is filled with graphics or photos. If the graphics are clear and self-explanatory (and they should be), you’re fine! As with your methods section, you may want to supplement your poster with a Word document handout. Be sure to ask your advisor before making any supplementary data available to the public.

Important notes about graphics: Most software packages (e.g., Microsoft Office) will allow you to copy and paste a figure from one program (e.g., Excel) into another (e.g., PowerPoint). This is the easiest way of inserting graphics into your poster. Don’t forget to cite images or graphics taken or made by other people!

**Conclusions:** At this point, anyone viewing your poster has already seen everything else, and this is the last section that they will actually read before either moving on to the next poster or asking you questions. This means you need to be pithy. If you don’t know what pithy means, look it up – it’s a good word and perfect for a conclusions section. I prefer to use bullet points for conclusions because I don’t want the viewer to wonder what he/she is supposed to take away from my poster. I want to tell the viewer exactly what he/she should remember. My rule
of thumb is no more than 5 bullet points, 5 words per bullet point. If you have many more than this, chances are you’ve tried covering too much information.

**Future Directions:** Based on your project, what do you recommend as the next steps in furthering your objectives? A simple bulleted list is good here, and you can dream BIG.

**References:** Every professor I have ever asked about this has had a different opinion. My view is this - omit references and provide a supplementary Word document for anyone interested. You don’t want to risk plagiarism by not citing sources, but you also don’t want to give up valuable real estate on your poster with words that most people don’t read.

**Pithy** (adj.); concise; using few words in a clever and effective way

**The Experience**

**Network, Network, Network** | Presenting your poster is not just about you telling people about your work. It should also give you the opportunity to ask questions. People who visit your poster are probably interested in what you do. If you are genuinely interested in your research, and want to network with like-minded colleagues, then bring along some business cards to hand out. You can print some in Microsoft word fairly easily, and you can even purchase pre-cut business card paper at an office supply store. The goal for you is to talk to as many people as you can. They will obviously ask you about your work, but don’t be afraid to ask them what they do! Ask for their contact information or business card and create your own network of contacts. If you’re like me and are terrible with names, keep a pen handy. When someone hands you a business card, jot down what they do and why you want to follow up with them. It will make writing follow-up emails much easier later on!

**First impressions** | Dress like you’re going to (but not in) a wedding. You don’t want to dress in a tuxedo or ball gown, but you also should not be wearing jeans, t-shirts, leggings or yoga pants, hoodies, or sneakers. Go for “business casual” and err on the side of too dressy than too casual. You may wind up talking to your future advisor or boss, so always greet passers-by and look like you mean business.

**Questions** | Hopefully, you will get a lot of questions during your poster session. No one ever knows the answer to every question they are asked, so don’t be nervous when someone asks you a question that you can’t answer. It’s perfectly fine to simply say, “Great question. I actually don’t have a great answer for you, but based on my work, I would say that…” Then just do your best to provide them with your best guess. If the question is really out there and you have no clue how to answer, you can simply say, “Interesting thought, and one that has me totally baffled. My work didn’t exactly address that, but it’s a great idea.” Then, engage them in a conversation about possible answers. You never know when you will meet a future research collaborator!
The Follow Up

After your presentation is over, be sure to email or call any attendees who you agreed to contact. Look through any business cards you were given, and be sure to respond to each contact, even if it’s only to offer a quick, “Thank you for coming by my poster at the conference. Do you have time to get coffee and continue the discussion?” The point is, if you offered to set up a meeting with someone to discuss your work, or if you want to collaborate with someone you met, always follow up. Importantly, don’t forget to look over any written evaluations you may have received. If your advisor attended the poster session (and he/she likely will), ask them for critical feedback. This probably won’t be the last time you will present a poster, so start thinking now about how to make the next poster even better.

Contacts

For information about the annual URSC Conference, or if you have questions about creating your poster, contact Cory Christopher, cory.christopher@uc.edu, or the URSC office, ursc@uc.edu, (513)556-3256.
References


