

RESEARCH – POSTER PRESENTATIONS

How to prepare a conference poster

Sheila Payne, Director of the International Observatory on End of Life Care, Help the Hospices Chair in Hospice Studies, Lancaster University, offers practical tips to guide you in producing a successful conference poster



The aim of the poster as a form of communication is to present in a visually appealing and concise way, the main message from your project. Many people are disappointed if their carefully prepared abstract is selected for presentation as a poster rather than to be delivered as an oral talk. In fact, some people are so disappointed that they fail to attend the conference at all, which is a great pity as they have missed an opportunity to disseminate their work, and caused problems for the conference organisers who have incurred expense in hiring poster display boards. Instead, I suggest that you joyfully accept the challenge of designing a creative, informative and eye-catching poster.

Let me start by saying what a conference poster is not: a way to advertise your hospice; a colourful artwork; a complete version of your dissertation/thesis/report in very small writing.

Making a start

The preparation of an academic poster needs to start by reading and following the conference organiser's instructions about size and orientation (landscape or portrait). What is the message

you want to convey? Try to focus on one or two important things rather than cover everything you have done during your project. Use a heading that clearly describes what your poster is about and maybe indicates the way you did your work. For example, 'Interaction in hospice day care' does not tell the reader as much as 'Increasing older patients' interactions with peers in hospice day care: a pilot study'. It often helps to divide the sections of text using subheadings such as 'Background or Context', 'Aims and objectives' or 'Goals'. Describe how the project was undertaken or, for research projects, explain the 'method'. List the 'key findings' and explain what these findings mean and include 'implications for practice'. The actual headings you use will depend upon the nature of your project (eg research or practice development) and also the type of conference. Remember that dense blocks of text are difficult to read and are unlikely to attract attention to your poster.

Designing your poster

Most people design their posters using software such as PowerPoint as this programme provides helpful templates

and numerous special effects. It also enables you to project a draft of your poster on to the wall to see how it looks from afar rather than close-up on your computer screen. Try to illustrate your poster using photographs (but get permission first from identifiable people), images, graphs, charts or tables. Use devices such as bullet points or highlighted text boxes. Colour can enhance your poster but white backgrounds with dark printing are easier to read than yellow or pale colours. Too many colours are distracting, try to limit the number or work with a specific colour scheme. Finally, make sure that you include your name and affiliations and those of your colleagues under the title. Then give your contact details, such as your email address, so that people interested in your work can contact you.

Feedback

In the International Observatory on End of Life Care, we always scrutinise all our posters in draft to get feedback from other team members on the design, readability, clarity of message and colour scheme. Remember that if you are going to an international conference, many readers of your poster

will be using English as a second language, so complex sentence structure or obscure terms, or abbreviations (even those that are very common in the UK) may not be well understood. Ask your friends and colleagues for constructive feedback on your draft poster, and act on their suggestions.

Finally, when you go to the conference take time to talk to people who are interested in your poster. This may lead to new insights or collaborations. You may like to take some A4 size printed copies of your poster for people to pick up.

Hopefully the advice in this article will encourage you to present your work at a conference and with a bit of luck even result in you winning the poster prize. ■

Links

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