

Bench philosophy (9): Presenting posters

Eye-Catching Posters

Like actors and starlets walking along the red carpet at the Cannes Film Festival, researchers presenting their work at the poster session during a congress lecture break only have a single chance to attract the observer's attention.

Not a simple task in the bustling crowd of a poster session. Usually, researchers pass posters at a distance of two or three metres, so you must aim to attract the researchers strolling around during the poster session from a distance. If you adopt a few simple tricks, even the experienced but shortsighted emeritus will recognise your poster. Catching the observer's eye is only the first step towards a successful poster presentation. The main task is to keep researchers in front of a poster reading its content.

A poster should be planned like a research project. First browse the material you have and collect the results you wish to present. Concentrate on a few essential points. Check if you already have enough pictures (photos or illustrations) or if you have to produce new ones. A picture speaks more than a thousand words; that is why a poster should be apportioned into two-thirds pictures and one-third text. A good picture imparts information much faster and more comprehensibly than a long text, which is hard to read in passing. Think

about the questions that your colleagues are likely to ask before you start preparing the poster. In most cases it is easier to clarify a question with a picture than with a lot of words.

Show your objects in maximum size or choose reasonable cut-outs. Every picture should be silhouetted against the background but pay attention to strong contrasts. Create your pictures with 300 dpi (dots per inch) so that it's possible to enlarge them without any problems. The quality of the plotted pictures should not fall below 100 dpi.

Choose a coloured but unstructured, i.e. plain background (see Fig. 1), since background pictures can create a jerky and confusing effect. Light backgrounds are the best choice. However, if you prefer a dark background, use bright or white lettering to achieve a high contrast by inverting colours. This only holds true for headlines or short passages, long lines of text in this style are very hard to read.

Avoid using loud background colours like neon-yellow or fluorescent green; these colours are very exhausting for the observers eye. It is guaranteed to repel your colleagues' when they pass the poster. Instead, choose discreet background colours that do not compete with the presented content.

Tell a visual story

Guide the viewer's eyes with concise pictures, visualising chronological or methodical sequences. Orientate yourself in the reading direction, which runs from the upper left to the lower right of the poster. Emphasise your basic statement by highlighting it from the other poster elements through its size or by putting it into a box, circle or a surface having a different colour.

The describing text is subordinate to the picture. The text explains the picture, not the other way round. Place the text close to the relevant picture. Too much space between text and picture will leave the observer disorientated. The lower border of your poster should be wider than the upper one, the vertical borders being the small-

est. Frames or coloured boxes should embrace several pictures or text elements; this is a feasible way to summarise research results or to reconcile them. Moreover, maximum attention is drawn to these poster elements.

Three character sizes, one font family

The poster text characters should be of a size legible from a distance of approximately one metre. Do not use more than three different character sizes. Your poster will look most harmonious if it contains just one single font family. Classic serif fonts, like Times or Courier, are easy to read. If you don't like these and you only intend to use small text on your poster, you may also try sans-serif fonts like Arial, Verdana or Tahoma.

As a rule of thumb, a body text having between 30 and 60 letters is easy to read. Longer lines have higher line pitches that facilitate reading. Stress important text passages with bold, underlined, small caps or capital letters but you should apply only two letter types on your poster.

Begin paragraphs with initials

This is a paragraph introduced by an initial. This is a paragraph introduced by an initial. This is a paragraph introduced by an initial. This is a paragraph introduced by an initial.



fungus and insects appearing in the upper soil area decompose organic waste. They need a suitable clima (humidity and warmth) and enough oxygen to do the dismantling...

Fig. 2

Separation of subject and background



Because of the distorted background, text and illustration are hard to read. Use a calm background instead.

Kidney development



Due to the plain background, text and illustration are easy to read. The emboldened headline and the box highlight the text.

Fig. 1

How to prepare eye-catching posters

- ▶ Divide your poster into two-thirds pictures and one-third text
- ▶ Use frames or coloured boxes to point out important messages
- ▶ Orientate the poster elements in the reading direction, i.e. from the upper left to the bottom right corner
- ▶ Border sizes on the vertical sides should be small, the bottom should have the largest and the top side should be somewhere in between

Pictures:

- ▶ Use large pictures, showing the objects in maximum size or choose reasonable cutouts
- ▶ The plotted pictures should have at least 100 dpi
- ▶ Choose discret background colours that do not detract from the presented content
- ▶ Arrange pictures and corresponding text close to one another

Text:

- ▶ Should be readable from a distance of one metre
- ▶ Use no more than three different format sizes, e.g. for headlines, columns and body text; stress important messages with bold or underlined text
- ▶ Use only one font family
- ▶ Body text: choose a line length between 30 and 60 letters
- ▶ Use bullets and numbers for lists and to emphasise important messages

Decorative letters or letter-like illustrations at the beginning of a paragraph, also called initial capitals (Fig. 2), help to highlight paragraphs. Although they draw particular attention, they could also disturb the fluency of reading. Insert bullets or numbers as useful methods to display lists on your poster. Initials also clip poster elements (particularly with two lines), simplify complex issues and may contain the "Take-Home-Messages". Denote your enumeration precisely with dots or other indicators.

The ideal poster should attract different kinds of meeting participants. The bustling types, who are always in a hurry, as well as the sauntering irresolute types, lingering in front of a poster for a short while. For the first category of attendees, which usually scans the poster content very fast, your poster should incite the reaction, "Aha, that's what they've done!" You may lure the latter kind of attendees with a picture and/

or a concise message contained in one line at the bottom of your poster. However, do not neglect your interested colleagues, who take their time to read a poster's text and have a little conversation with the presenter. Your poster should leave them with a deeper understanding of your work and upcoming questions should be easily answered on the basis of the pictures.

Basic software tools

You can prepare the poster layout and the graphics with two-dimensional vector programmes such as Illustrator or Freehand. The professional programmes Quark or InDesign are a good choice for mere layout. You may also use the photo-editing programme Photoshop but be aware that it creates very large data files. If you are familiar with PowerPoint you could consider this as a further option. Produce your poster template in DIN A3 format and have it blown up to the desired size by the print shop. If you scale up from DIN A3 to DIN A0 the pictures and graphics should have 400 dpi (300 dpi would suffice if blowing up from DIN A3 to DIN A1).

It is much cheaper to print the poster digitally than to use Offset-Print. Ask your print shop specialist which data format is preferable (usually PDF for posters and JPG

or TIF for pictures). A thin lamination will protect the poster and you can still roll it up easily for transport. The colours on laminated posters are even more brilliant under adverse light conditions; but beware this surface causes reflection. Posters mounted on plates with a polyurethane rigid foam core (Kapa) are very stable but sometimes impractical to transport. You can also protect glued posters with foil. The colours appear softer and the foil counteracts light reflection.

If prepared accurately with a cutting machine, even old-fashioned glued posters can become eye-catchers. Homemade glued posters give the impression of brand new research results. However, the tendency leans towards digitally printed posters. Glued posters could eventually leave the observer feeling that the scientist couldn't afford a professional design!

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