

BEST PRACTICE GUIDE

WRITING AND PRESENTING AN ACADEMIC POSTER

Academic posters are a powerful way to communicate your research in a succinct, visual and engaging way. Following this best-practice guide will help you create a well-designed poster that not only communicates your research effectively but also sparks meaningful conversations and collaborations.

1. Understanding your audience

Understanding your audience helps you determine the appropriate level of technical language and the amount of background information needed. Before you begin designing, consider three fundamental questions:

- **Who is your audience?** Are they experts in your field or from related disciplines? Are they academics, students, practitioners?
- **What do they already know?** This determines how much background context to include. Avoid jargon and explain technical terms if your audience may be unfamiliar.
- **What do you want to tell them?** Focus on your key message and main findings.

2. Designing your poster

Think of yourself as a 'tour guide' when designing and talking to people about your poster. It is often best to highlight key patterns and trends in your research rather than overwhelming your audience with detail; they can always ask questions if they want further information.

University branding

- If your poster is representing the University of Reading at a conference or will be displayed in your department, you will need to use the [official University PowerPoint templates](#).
- There are two templates available, portrait and landscape, and they are set up at the correct size with the right fonts, colours, logo and layout.
- See these [conference poster PPT examples](#) to get a feel for what makes a good poster.

Visual hierarchy and layout

- A well-designed poster looks professional and authoritative. Consider the layout, font type and size, use of white space, images and graphs and use of colour.
- Think of your poster as a **visual story, not a paper printed large**. Create a clear hierarchy with bold headings that guide viewers through your research in a logical flow: background → research questions/objectives → methods → results → conclusions → references/acknowledgments → contact information.
- Leave white space to prevent clutter and increase readability.
- Use arrows or columns to guide the eye naturally through your content.
- Your poster should be readable from 1-2 meters/3-6 feet away.

Writing effective content

- Write a snappy, informative title to hook your audience from the start.
- Include a clear, concise abstract with main findings and implications.
- Get your message across in the first sentence or two of each section.
- Keep text minimal – use bullet points and short sentences rather than dense paragraphs.
- Include only information that supports your main findings – focus on your most compelling findings rather than trying to include everything.
- Use short titles and subtitles that capture the essence of each section.
- Write in short sentences (20 words maximum).
- Use active language – "we discovered" rather than "it was found".
- Vary your verbs – demonstrated, discovered, explored.
- Minimise adjectives – keep it to the point.
- Avoid acronyms when possible; spell them out when used.
- Explain technical terms and use accessible language.
- Edit ruthlessly – less is more.
- Have a clear "take-home" message.

Visual elements

- Make your data the star through compelling graphs, charts and images.
- Include meaningful captions – one clear sentence summarising the dataset or stating the key takeaway message.
- Simplify datasets as much as possible to highlight patterns or trends and illustrate main points clearly.
- Use high-contrast colours for readability and limit to 2–3 accent colours for consistency.
- White space is your friend – a cluttered poster overwhelms viewers.
- Consider including a QR code to your paper, website or email.

Supporting materials

Since visitors have limited time to absorb the information on your poster, it can be helpful to have some information they can take away. This might include:

- a small version of the poster as a flyer;
- contact cards with poster title, your name and email;
- QR codes linking to your paper, website or additional materials;
- a one-page summary of key findings.

3. Presenting your poster

Think conversational – it's a dialogue, not a monologue. The best poster presentations create opportunities for meaningful academic dialogue and professional relationships that extend well beyond the conference itself. Focus on engaging with your audience, sharing your passion for your research and building connections that will benefit your work.

- **Develop multiple pitch versions:** Prepare different versions of your research summary and practice transitioning between these based on audience cues and interest levels. This should include:
 - **30-second summary** for casual browsers.
 - **1-2 minute overview** for engaged viewers.
 - **3-5 minute detailed explanation** for those wanting specifics and deep discussions.
- **Positioning and presence:** Stand beside (not in front of) your poster. Smile, make eye contact and invite people in. Be approachable – enthusiasm is contagious. Let viewers read initially, then offer to walk them through highlights. Ask openers like "Would you like a quick overview?" or "What's your background in this area?". Tailor your pitch based on their responses.
- **Engage with the audience:** Think of yourself as a tour guide. Highlight key patterns and trends rather than overwhelming with detail. Ask engaging questions like "What aspects of this problem do you encounter in your work?". Treat interactions as conversations that you're leading, not formal presentations. Tailor your content to the needs and interests of each visitor. Allow time for questions and discussion. When someone shows genuine interest, suggest continuing the conversation over coffee.
- **Anticipate questions:** Prepare answers for likely questions about methodology and limitations, applications and implications, future directions and technical details. Remember: it's perfectly acceptable to be honest and say "That's a great question – I'll have to look into that."
- **Getting feedback:** One of the reasons for giving poster presentations is to get feedback on your research, so think about ways that people might give you this. You might have a feedback form that you ask people to fill in on the day or ask them to email you with any comments. One of the simplest ways to collect feedback is to have sticky notes available and pens or have a QR code linking to an online form or feedback email.

4. Follow up

- Reach out within a week to new connections with brief emails referencing your conversation.
- Share relevant papers or resources you discussed.
- Suggest concrete ways to collaborate.
- Use feedback to improve your work or presentation approach.
- Post on your website, LinkedIn, or research repositories like OSF or Figshare.

Final tips for success

- Your poster needs to make an immediate impact as visitors may only spend 1-2 minutes looking at it initially.
- The goal is meaningful dialogue, not just information transfer – poster sessions are collaborative discussions, not formal presentations.
- Quality interactions matter more than quantity, so make sure you are prepared for all potential visitors.
- Think visual – it's a poster, not a paper.
- Be human – your passion and clarity matter more than perfection.