Academic Posters: A Brief Guide

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What is an academic poster?

An academic poster is a type of assessment or presentation medium that requires planning, a keen understanding of the presented information, and the adoption of simple guidelines. It differs from a typical 'poster' as an academic poster provides a visual representation of a research project that has been completed – but not yet been fully synthesized into a presentation or a lecture format.   A poster is also accepted to be no less 'worthy' than a presentation within the scientific fields: It is just another way of presenting data.

A poster will often be presented during a *poster session* that is held during a conference, either at specific times or days. If the posters remain for the significant duration, there may be multiple opportunities to discuss your work (i.e. 2 hour sessions dedicated to posters) so be aware and be prepared!   Otherwise, you are given a time-slot during which you have to present / stand-by your poster.   Delegates will browse round the session reading posters – when they read something that particularly interests them they are then likely to approach the poster owner with questions about the project.

There should be guidelines that accompany your poster session that give you details on the size, orientation, formatting guidelines, and expected quality of images. Following the guidelines for your presentation will make sure that you have a smooth sailing presentation.

So, in short – your work is written up in a large (A2) poster format and you are given a time in which people can walk around and discuss complex ideas in a short time-frame.

I know what a poster is, but I don't know how to make one.

There are two audiences that may benefit this document: Project students, and presenting authors. There is no real difference between the expectations of the audience: An academic poster is there to provide a succinct version of your work.

There are ways in which a poster can be created relatively quickly, and all of them require the following basic information:

- Size and formatting guidelines of poster.
- Your abstract or project introduction to the project.
- An insight to the research questions, method of investigation, results and conclusions.
- The time-limit of the presentation: Do you need handouts? A table for laptop?
- A pen, ruler, and A4 paper.

Let's discuss each of the above bullet points in turn. A poster can be created using Adobe's InDesign, Adobe's Photoshop, or Microsoft's PowerPoint or Publisher.

Sizing and Formatting Guidelines

In many situations - there are often accompanying stipulations that can be found in project handbooks that provide further detail on exactly what should be on a poster. It is advisable to follow such a handbook!

The size of your poster should be governed by the amount of allocated space you are provided, and what type of stand you are given. The board size should be providing within a guideline document – but the standard size

measures 7' tall and 3' 10" wide, and it may be a tri-fold or bi-fold stand.

Generally though academic posters are sized using ISO216 A-series definition. In many academic institutions the paper size will be a single A2 (420mm x 594mm or 16.5" x 23.4") portrait poster.

Stationary supplies (pushpins, Velcro) for mounting the poster may be provided - so be aware of how the poster will be mounted. Knowing where you will place pushpins on your poster may affect the overall design (discussed later)!

Abstract

For any project there should be an introduction, abstract, précis, or overview available. Contained in a good quality abstract there should be the following information:

- Explanation of the work (*introduction*)
- Explanation of why the work is important in context (*rationale*)
- A description of the aims, objectives, and measures of success *(Objectives)*
- A description of the research methods, design methods, or project lifecycle *(methods)*
- Results and conclusions that have been taken from the project's findings. *(Results, Conclusions)*

It is these central sections and associated information that should be distilled into your poster. Each of the heads in italics are often used as starting points for the poster's sections, as given in the attached example Figure 1 - Poster Template landscape.

Poster Design: Considerations

A good academic poster is one that conveys a clear, succinct, easily-read, easily-understood message that inspires conversation between the reader and the author(s). To achieve this there are several key points to note:

Issues

Think about the structure, layout and flow of information, the amount of text and graphics, and where you use your resources.
A bad poster will overwhelm the reader, and this will be magnified if it's unreadable or cannot be plainly understood. Careful design is essential.

Text: Font and Size

Keep your choice of fonts simple – and differentiate between headings and main text with size or font. Do not overly complicate your design with several fonts for each section, or change the colour of the text.

Generally:
- Titles should be 72-point
- Headings should be 40-point
- Body should be 28-point
- Captions should be 24-point

Colours

Remember: The poster should be readable from over 1m away. Use colour-wheel theory to separate your main text from images and the poster's background. The expected audience may range from 16-72 year olds! It is preferable to keep your text black, and use a white text-box if you are using an image as the background.

Graphics

The size of your poster will vary, from A4 to A0 depending on the conference. The variance in size requires images to be of high quality, and in vector format. A low-resolution JPEG will not scale up to A0!

Remember to be aware of your colours: Are your images too dark? Too bright? Does the image cause the text to be unreadable?

First Draft

In the previous sections the purpose, detail, and formatting guidelines have been discussed. Now all that's left to do is actually create your poster. It is often recommended that you use an A4 sheet of blank paper and design your poster there first. By constraining yourself you will begin to understand that a larger poster does not mean more space: The text and images will also have to be scaled up!

Some examples (Figure 1, Figure 2) are given below of how to begin your poster:
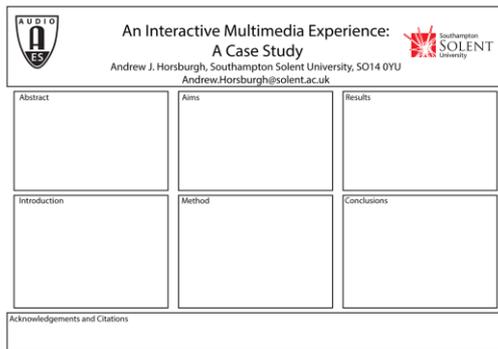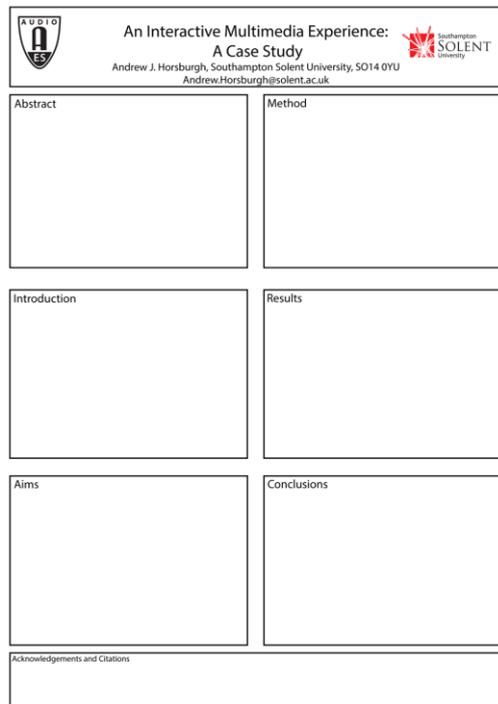
Figure 1 - Poster Template landscape

Figure 2 - Poster template portrait

Checklist

Below in Table 1 there is a brief checklist to make sure that you complete the key stages of designing and printing a poster. It is possible that you can create a genre-defining poster without this checklist but it is a place to start from!

Item	Completed?
Find the guidelines for the conference or event	
What is the audience: Specialist, informed, or layman?	
Write 300-500 words on your topic for submission (or use the abstract)	
Create appropriate	
headings for you sections	
What are your key, attractive graphs and images?	
Design your basic layout: Top to bottom? Left to right?	
Format the type (Two-fonts, use sizes that are readable from a distance!)	
Check your text for technical errors and 'flow'	
Ensure your text and graphics are clear. This maybe a font / colour issue!	
Proof read!	
Print an A4 version – can you read the text clearly? Do you understand what the poster is saying?	
Have a friend check your poster: Is it interesting?	
If you're happy: Print the full size version!	

Table 1 - Checklist for success

Extras

If your work is based upon a physical build, or can be demonstrated – think about making is available at the presentation.

If you have conducted a series of questionnaires or used a data-gathering tool that can be printed: consider a hand-out. Extra information can support your poster significantly, and may in fact reduce the number of 'basic' questions!

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