

Stand out
with your
scientific poster

Toon Verlinden & Hans Van de Water

**STAND
OUT** with your
scientific
POSTER

A step by step approach

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A SHORT SUMMARY

14 steps to a good poster

- 1 Who are you making the poster for? 26
What do they care about, what do they already know, what jargon do they use.
- 2 Choose one key message 30
One sentence, no jargon.
- 3 Write your introduction 40
Write a problem–solution–advantage sentence. Use the words BUT, THEREFORE, SO THAT to glue the sentences together.
- 4 Draw a pyramid structure 46
What will appear on your poster?
- 5 Write your text 52
Max. 400 words.
- 6 Make a handout and QR code 57
For all your extra info.
- 7 Sketch your poster 68
You don't always have to use blocks.
- 8 Come up with an attention-grabbing title 82
Don't rush this part. It's often the first thing your audience will see.
- 9 Find the perfect image 102
Put this on your poster first. Make it big.
- 10 Think about your design 113
Consider the dimensions and orientation, but also colour, font and white space.

11	Bring in your data	126
	<i>Don't just take a screenshot of your Excel charts. Put the conclusion of the graph in the title too.</i>	
12	Add an element of surprise	135
	<i>Bring a prop and get creative.</i>	
13	Ask for feedback	143
	<i>Fellow researchers aren't always the best source of feedback.</i>	
14	Think of an icebreaker question	151
	<i>It's up to you, not your audience, to get the conversation started.</i>	

QUICK REMINDERS

→ **In many cases, a pitch poster is better than an expert poster**
Whenever it might be difficult to read your poster or you have an audience that isn't full of experts, you're best off choosing a pitch poster instead of a more standard expert poster. Like, for example, during an online conference, shotgun presentation, research day or a general conference with researchers from various disciplines. We talk more about pitch posters on page 90.

→ **Word count**

Limit the number of words on your expert poster to 400, roughly split between:

- 140–240 words for your title, intro and conclusions
- 260–300 words for your body text

A pitch poster typically has 150–200 words.

→ **Font size**

→ **Readable from roughly 3 metres**

Title: 96 pt (or for a short title: 120 pt)

Subtitle: 60 pt

→ **Readable from roughly 1.5 metres**

Headers: 50 pt

Body text: 32–40 pt

→ **Readable from roughly 40 cm**

At least 24 pt. Note that this is the *minimum* font size for e.g. references. Body text needs to be bigger.

- **Check the dimensions and orientation** before you start creating your poster in a design tool. A0 and A1 are the most common sizes.
 - **A0: 118.9 cm x 84.1 cm**
 - **A1: 84.1 cm x 59.4 cm**

- **Don't forget your contact info**

Intro

Congratulations. It's a poster!

You've been selected to present your research in the form of a scientific poster. Congratulations! Something to smile about, and rightly so. A poster fair is a place where you'll have interesting conversations, meet new people and gain some fascinating insights. Who knows, you may even get some valuable feedback from that all-important expert as well. Or at least... that's what it should be like.

In reality, a poster fair is often quite challenging. On the one hand, you have the researcher standing enthusiastically next to their poster, but after a while realising that visitors are avoiding eye contact and that nobody wants to talk. On the other hand, you have the participating researcher who's bravely searching for new insights and developments but ends up rushing around between walls of poster text that have been expertly written in abstract sentences full of jargon. At the end, both the researcher and the visitor are left with a bad feeling. That poster fair had so much potential, so what went wrong?

As you read that last paragraph, your mind may have been darting in all directions: how do you make a good poster then? Is a poster session useful? What if nobody comes to talk to you and you're bored out of your mind as you fidget awkwardly next to your poster panel? All valid questions, because if you don't take the right approach with your poster, it's guaranteed to get lost in a sea of all the other posters at the conference. But there's an extra challenge: as well as standing out from the crowd, your poster also needs to be more appealing than the coffee break.

It's no secret that conferences often organise their poster sessions to coincide with the breaks. The audience has just sat through four presentations in a row and can now finally stretch their legs. They're

on their way to the coffee break to catch up with their colleagues, but on the way there they come across you and your poster. At that point, you need to convince them not to take that well-earned break, but to listen to you and look at your poster instead. And to win that battle, you're going to need a solid argument.

Don't get me wrong, a poster fair is a fantastic event. A celebration of science. Together with presentations and papers, posters are the most important way for researchers to communicate with each other. But unfortunately, the way we make posters actually prevents conversations from getting started during the fair and visitors from taking home insights. And that's a shame. To get the most out of a poster fair, scientific posters need to be a lot better.

The real goal of a poster: getting conversations started

Why are you making a poster? Why are you investing time and money in presenting it at a conference? Of course, a few days at a conference in New York, Barcelona or Cape Town doesn't sound bad, and getting to 'play tourist' is a bonus, but it's not the reason you take your poster to a conference.

Perhaps you think you're making a poster to convey information. To explain to other people what you did during your research and show the results you've already found. But presentations and papers do a much better job of conveying information. When it comes to papers and presentations, your audience can sit down and quietly process the information. And it's one-way traffic: you explain or write everything down; they listen or read and can take notes.

In that respect, a poster is in fact completely useless for conveying information. Your audience is standing in a busy conference hall; people are staring at them as they walk around; they're short on time; it's not so easy for them to take notes; and if there's too much information on your poster, they'll completely ignore it.

During a poster fair, your audience is simply not prepared to absorb large amounts of information. They have an hour to walk around a hundred posters and will give you five minutes of their time *at most*. Try conveying enough information *and* having a meaningful conversation in that small space of time. 'Conveying information' is, therefore, at most a nice-to-have for a scientific poster, but it cannot and should not be your main goal.

The *real* goal of your scientific poster is to start a conversation. Because that's where posters come into their own. They are real conversation starters that draw people into the world of your research. You get one-on-one contact with those who stop at your poster, which means an opportunity for a real conversation. You can delve deeper into the questions that your research raises and look for a link to the other persons research. You can share anecdotes, brainstorm follow-up research together, consider where your results can be put to good use, which projects you might be able to start up or which other perspectives would add even more value. A presentation or paper doesn't even come close to doing that. Researchers sometimes see scientific posters as the conference presentation's less important little brother, but that's unfair. A poster is a powerhouse when it comes to conversations and new insights.

That observation provides us with a key takeaway: **the winning poster isn't the one that conveys the most information but the one that starts the most conversations.**

Key takeaway

*Posters are for starting conversations,
not conveying information.*

So everything about your poster presentation should be aimed at breaking the ice, starting conversations, and raising questions and interesting insights to be discussed with your fellow researchers. Having information on your poster is of course important, but it's only there to keep the conversation going. To help you answer questions and support your insights with your data. The goal is not to dump all the information from your research on your poster and your audience. In fact, that's a really bad idea.

This single insight will hopefully have a big impact on how you both look at and create posters.

Why do all scientific posters look the same?

If you type 'research poster' into a search engine, you'll see posters that all look the same. How did that happen? Why does it feel like a poster has to be an impenetrable wall of text? Simple: because we copy each other and are too afraid to do anything different.

Here's a scenario. Two to three weeks before the conference, you suddenly remember that you really should make a start on that poster. You open up PowerPoint and admit that you actually have no idea where to begin. Posters are a visual medium, and nobody ever taught you how to make one. So you wander down the corridor