

# Visual Storytelling: Designing an Effective Poster

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You are awesome! We're so excited that you are willing to donate your time and energy to create a poster and present it to students to get them excited about humanities research. Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to create a poster that will function to (1) catch the audiences' eye as they walk past and (2) serve as a visual aid when you're presenting your topic during the poster session. We hope that this workshop will help you develop your topic, but also that it will help you come up with ideas for your poster. Below are some tips for creating visual displays in general and for posters in particular.

## General Design Principles

- **Design elements:** Make conscious choices in how you use the following elements in your visual: line, shape, direction, size, texture, color, and value (lightness versus darkness). For example, lines can be used to indicate the relationship between elements whereas colors can be used to show differences.
- **Flow:** make sure there is a clear flow or path for the eye to follow through your poster. People are good at following columns – we read those naturally. Other formats may require arrows, lines or numbers to ensure that the audience can easily find their way through the information.
- **Principles of perception:** allow you to visually group items for your audience in a way that makes it clear that they are related. Viewers will automatically understand that things are tied together if they are (1) closer to one another than to other things (proximity), (2) more similar to one another than other things nearby (similarity, use size, shape and color to indicate similarity), and (3) enclosed by a boundary and segregated from other elements nearby (enclosure).

## Poster Tips

Remember that you are the main focus of your presentation and that your poster is just there to support you – so it shouldn't be overwhelming (i.e. full of tiny text or overly complicated diagrams). Here are some things to think about when designing a poster.

- **Reduce text and focus on visuals:** if you do have text, go for short sentences or bulleted lists – avoid giant paragraphs that will scare viewers.
- **Pick pleasing color combinations for the background design of your poster:** the colors you choose should complement the elements that you place on the poster; it can also help to use cool colors (like green, blue and grey) instead of warm colors (red, yellow, orange) which can clash with other elements you include on the poster. White is always a good choice, but a well chosen color may help catch viewers' attention.
- **Be kind to colorblind viewers:** avoid red/green color combinations because some audience members will not be able to distinguish between these two colors.

- **Embrace white space:** it is pleasing for the eye to look at and can help to define sections of your poster by creating borders.
- **Borders are your friend:** they help the viewer determine which information goes together and to understand the flow of your poster
- **Font:** should be readable from 2 feet away. Use sans serif fonts; avoid underlining and use **bold** or *italics* for emphasis instead; sentence case is much easier to read than Title Case or ALL CAPS.
- **Titles:** can help guide the audience through your poster – a title at the top (either centered or top left!) will help give them an idea of what is happening on your poster while section headings can help guide the viewer through your information.
- **Put less important stuff at the bottom:** your audience will start by looking at the top left.
- **Print it out on 8.5X11" paper to proofread:** if there are elements that are too small to read on this format, it will be too small on the big format. You can also print it in grayscale to check on contrast
- **Be obsessive compulsive:** take the time to really polish your poster, make sure everything is spelled correctly, aligned properly, and pleasant to look at.

### Poster Presentation Tips

- **Know your audience:** you will be talking to a general audience made up primarily of teenagers – what is their motivation, what are they most likely to be excited about? Is there language that you should avoid because they won't be familiar with it? Tailor your presentation to be appropriate to your audience.
- **Know your message:** figure out what your key message is (hopefully this workshop will help with that!) and make sure you address it and that everything you say comes back to this main message.
- **Prepare a 2 sentence and a 3-5 minute overview:** And practice it!
- **Smile and make eye contact to invite people to visit your poster:** make sure your body language is friendly and welcoming. Look out at the audience, avoid closed off body postures (like crossed arms), try to be friendly and inviting!
- **When a new person walks up when you're in the middle of talking to someone else:** acknowledge them (smile and make eye contact, maybe say something brief), but finish the conversation you were having with the people already there.
- **Interact with your poster while presenting:** point out things that you're talking about to draw the audiences' eyes to the most relevant parts of your poster.
- **Follow good presentation practices:** make eye contact, use gestures, maintain a conversational tone, smile! Be excited!

## References and Resources

- See an Oral Communication Tutor to practice presenting your poster – visit [speakinghelp.stanford.edu](http://speakinghelp.stanford.edu) for more information or [sututor.stanford.edu](http://sututor.stanford.edu) to make an appointment.
- See a Digital Media Consultant for help with your poster design – visit <https://undergrad.stanford.edu/tutoring-support/hume-center/see-tutor/digital-media-tutoring> for more information.
- **The three chapters on posters in *Designing Scientific Presentations* by Matt Carter are generally applicable and helpful and an e-book is available through the Stanford Library - <http://searchworks.stanford.edu/view/9863852>**
- “Designing conference posters” by Colin Purrington is a very helpful (and quite funny) website full of tips: <http://colinpurrington.com/tips/poster-design>
- Pimp My Poster is a flickr stream maintained by Colin Purrington and is a good place for inspiration, or if you’re feeling brave you can post your poster and get feedback: <https://www.flickr.com/groups/pimpmyposter/>
- “Design elements and principles” – Useful Wikipedia article, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Design\\_elements\\_and\\_principles](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Design_elements_and_principles)
- “Elements and Principles of Design” – more on design elements with fun drawings - <http://www.johnlovet.com/test.htm>
- “Gestalt laws of grouping” part of the Wikipedia article “Gestalt Psychology” - [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gestalt\\_psychology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gestalt_psychology)