How to create an effective poster presentation

By Rose O. Sherman, EdD, RN, NEA

Presenting your project at a conference? Here's advice that can make your poster more effective and eye-catching.

ORGANIZERS of nursing conferences depend on nurses who have created new programs or are doing research to submit their work for presentation at conferences. Through these presentations, nursing knowledge is disseminated.

If you belong to a professional organization, you've probably received at least one call for abstracts. Arriving well in advance of the conference date, this is an invitation to submit an abstract for presentation at the conference. You may have the choice of submitting an abstract for either an oral (podium) presentation or a poster presentation. Poster presentations can be a good way to get started presenting your work—and they're a great opportunity to get feedback and suggestions from colleagues.

Congrats! Now get started.

It's exciting to get a letter or e-mail telling you that your poster proposal has been accepted for a conference. But don't waste timing resting on your laurels. When asked what they've learned about doing posters, many experienced presenters say they wish they'd begun their poster design earlier because the process took much longer than they anticipated. So to avoid a time crunch, start designing your poster shortly after your abstract is accepted.

Plan the size, content, and layout

Unlike an oral presentation, the poster itself should do most of the talking about your project. Good design matters. It allows you to tell the "story" of your work more effectively.

Begin by carefully reviewing the poster guidelines for the conference. These guidelines specify what size the poster should be and how it will be displayed—tabletop, corkboard, or easel. Poster size affects how much information you can put on the poster.

Allowable poster sizes for conferences vary widely.

Poster content should closely follow the format of the abstract you submitted. But keep in mind that a poster is not an abstract. With a poster, your goal is to tell a clear, simple story of your work. If your poster topic is a project or an organizational innovation, see *Sample conference poster* for ideas on what content to put where.
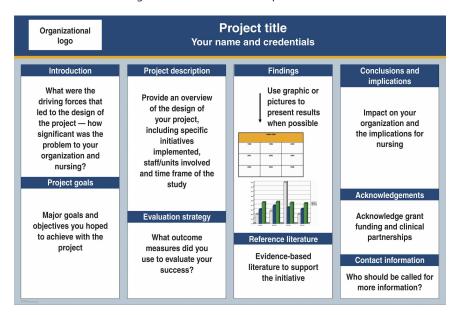
In contrast, a poster that presents research findings should include:
• background and significance of the study
• aims of the study
• methods
• results
• discussion and implications.

Many healthcare organizations and universities have graphic design resources available to assist with poster design. Some organizations even ask presen-

Sample conference poster

If your poster is for a project or an organizational innovation, you might want to place the various content categories as shown in the sample below.

Organizational logo	**Project title** Your name and credentials		
Introduction What were the driving forces that led to the design of the project — how significant was the problem to your organization and nursing?	**Project description** Provide an overview of the design of your project, including specific initiatives implemented, staff/units involved and time frame of the study	**Findings** Use graphic or pictures to present results when possible	**Conclusions and implications** Impact on your organization and the implications for nursing
Project goals Major goals and objectives you hoped to achieve with the project	**Evaluation strategy** What outcome measures did you use to evaluate your success?	**Reference literature** Evidence-based literature to support the initiative	**Acknowledgements** Acknowledge grant funding and clinical partnerships **Contact information** Who should be called for more information?

ters to use a specific template. Today many posters are designed with Microsoft PowerPoint templates, but you can also lay out the sections of your poster on a large piece of poster board (available at art supply or office supply stores) before finalizing it. Or you might consider using an Internet vendor (such as www.makesigns.com). Many vendors not only guide you through poster design but also can print and ship your poster.

Use a "less is more" design
The maxim "less is more" is good advice to follow for a poster. Although you may be tempted to include every detail of your project or research, you won't have enough space to do this. What's more, you *shouldn't* do this; it would make your poster too busy.
  Here are some design tips to follow:
- *Leave adequate white space.* Some empty space is critical to readability and legibility. Without it, the reader has no visual pauses.

Presenting a poster is a chance to learn from attendees about aspects of your work that particularly resonate with your audience.

- *Convey your message clearly.* The poster should capture the attention of attendees and convey at least one significant idea they'll remember. Most people spend 3 to 5 minutes viewing a poster, so use plain, descriptive language that leaves no doubt what your poster is about. Generally, posters are read from left to right; organize the content with this in mind. When possible, lead the viewer through the logical flow using bold take-home points or arrows.
- *Use a visual image.* People retain visual images longer than the written word, so aim for at least one visual image—a photograph, an illustration, a graph.
- *Make it readable.* Design the poster so it can be read from a distance of 4' to 6'. To accomplish this, lettering has to be at least 1" high. The title should be readable from 15' to 20' away, with letters 2" to 3" high. Try to have high contrast between the background and text. Generally, a lighter background with darker text is easier to read.
- *Pick fonts carefully.* Arial and Tahoma are examples of nonserif fonts that work well for poster titles. Serif fonts, such as Times New Roman and Courier, are easier to read at smaller sizes and work well for body text. Having too many font types on a poster can be distracting, so use at most two to three fonts, with bold or italics for emphasis only. Avoid all uppercase letters (capitals) in your poster, as this makes material harder to read.
- *Use color sparingly.* Although most presenters want colorful posters, color must be incorporated carefully. Blue and green are popular because they're considered calming.
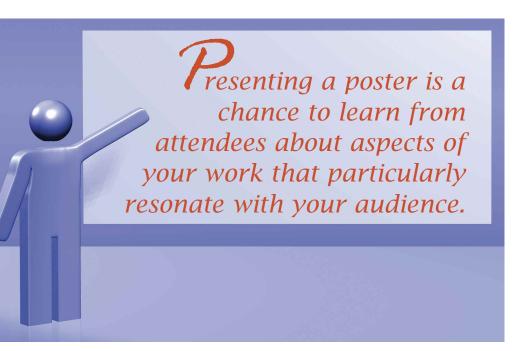- *Ask colleagues for help.* If this is your first time designing a poster, ask an experienced colleague for help. Before the poster is printed, have colleagues familiar with your subject area review it for clarity and possible errors. Proofread the poster carefully before you transport it to the conference.

Transporting and setting up your poster
Posters can be delivered to the conference site by overnight services, such as FedEx or UPS, but many presenters prefer to hand-carry them in poster canisters or portfolios. Normally, posters are set up just before the conference begins. You should receive advance guidelines from conference organizers telling you how to set up your poster. If the poster will be attached to corkboard, find out if you're expected to bring the required materials (usually pushpins or Velcro strips) to adhere it.

Most professional meeting agendas set aside specific times for poster presentations. Many organizations offer continuing education credit for poster session attendance. Be aware that if your poster is accepted at a conference, a presenter familiar with the project or research is expected to be available during poster sessions to answer questions.

A networking opportunity

Poster presentations are excellent opportunities not just to showcase your work but also to network with colleagues who have similar interests. Effective presenters introduce themselves to attendees and "walk" them through their poster, often adding information that they think will interest them. Some attendees may want to take the information back to their organizations, so consider having handouts available to distribute at the conference. Also, bring your business cards or written contact information to give to participants.

From poster to article?

Interest in your poster by conference attendees may inspire you to take the next step—turning it into an article. Often, journal editors attend specialty conferences and visit poster exhibits. This can be a good opportunity to query them about their journals' potential interest in your topic.

Presenting a poster is a chance to learn from attendees about aspects of your work that particularly resonate with your audience. This can give you a better idea of how to present your work in a journal article to ensure it's informative and interesting and provides clear implications for the nursing profession.

Poster sessions have become an important part of most professional conferences and are an excellent way for presenters to share their work. Enjoy the experience of proudly standing next to your poster and discussing your work with interested colleagues.   ✱

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