Ten steps to successful poster presentation

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Abstract

Receiving a letter confirming acceptance for you to present a poster at a conference can evoke mixed emotions. Joy, panic, fear and dread are among the many possible emotions and this is not exclusive to first time presenters. Developing an effective poster presentation is a skill that you can learn and can provide a rewarding way to present your work in a manner less intimidating than oral presentation (Shelledy, 2004). The key to successful poster presentation is meticulous, timely, well informed preparation. This article outlines ten steps to help guide you through the process to maximize your success.

Key words: Poster Presentation ■ Dissemination ■ Professional Development

The development and submission of an abstract can be a nerve wracking and stressful experience, however, a letter of acceptance can sometimes evoke further mixed emotions. Joy, panic, satisfaction, fear and dread are among the possible emotions experienced and it is worthy of note that this is not just exclusive to first time presenters.

Put simply, a poster is a story board of information (Jackson and Sheldon, 1998). Poster presentations are an excellent way to communicate the results of your research or clinical/educational developments or initiatives. The poster should provide for interaction between the presenter and the audience, i.e. facilitate discussion and, as such, is an ideal opportunity to make contacts and network with others who possess similar interests. Developing an effective poster presentation is a skill that is easy to learn and provides a rewarding way to present your work in a supportive atmosphere that can be less intimidating than a formal oral lecture presentation (Shelledy, 2004), particularly for the novice. The key to successful poster presentation is meticulous, timely, well-informed preparation. We have

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therefore compiled ten steps to help with your preparation and maximize your success.

Step 1 – Planning your poster

Before you start to prepare the poster there are a number of issues you need to consider. First, what exactly is it you are hoping to present? Are you presenting a research report or disseminating practice development? This is important as it will dictate the content and layout of your poster so you need to be clear about what it is you want to communicate. Of course, this will have been established when you wrote your abstract but do not make the mistake of using the wrong format to get your message across (see *Figures 1* and *2*). If your poster is not a research report then there is no point in setting it out as such.

Second, you need to consider your audience. Is the conference solely for nurses or is it multidisciplinary? If it is the latter you should consider providing more detailed background information and outline its value in the multidisciplinary arena. You should refrain from using abbreviations as they can mean something different to practitioners from another discipline.

Third, what does your audience already know about your subject area? This is an important consideration because if you provide too much depth of information to an audience who have limited background knowledge it can be off putting and may inhibit discussions with you. Conversely, your audience may be experts in your subject area – you do not want to lecture them. If this is the case you should focus on application of results and further developments, etc.

Step 2 – Things to consider before constructing your poster

Developing a well designed, informative and creative poster can take a significant amount of time. This can vary from hours to weeks and as a general guide, however long you think it will take – double it. Respondents in a study by Moore et al (2001) reported that the most challenging aspect of the poster development process was limiting the information. Many struggled between producing an uncluttered poster, while at the same time, getting the information across in a clear way. Less is more as posters are a visual display and should entice the audience to move in closer, rather like a window display or a table at a car boot sale. The poster should be clear, concise and appealing to the eye and as such should not be littered with too much text. Try to keep the text brief and avoid acronyms. Use bullet points where possible and utilize tables and graphs to illustrate your points. A key to creating a clear poster is to ensure that the text is legible and consistent. The most commonly used font is Arial but make sure you use the same font throughout, this includes titles and sub-headings. Your poster should easily be read at a distance of 1.5 meters. Choose your font size carefully and of course, this depends on the size of your poster but do have the largest text for your title, smaller for headings and the same size for all text (*Box 1*).

If you can't fit all your text on the poster cut it down. The poster should communicate key points and encourage the audience to discuss your poster with you. It is during these discussions that you will offer much

Box 1. Font sizes for poster text

Main title	100 points	At least 4 cm high
Subheadings	50 points	1.5–2 cm high
Body text	25 points	0.5–1 cm high

more information. The layout of your poster is important as most people read from top to bottom, left to right, therefore the sequence should take this into account (Butz et al, 2004). We are sure many readers have visited a poster and made no sense of it because the sequencing was difficult to follow and as such did not get the information across.

Once you are clear what you want your poster to say then you can begin with its construction. It is helpful at his stage to use a scaled down version with sticky paper or card to organize the content and layout. As a general rule, if you are presenting research, the content includes the following stages:
- Title
- Abstract
- Introduction
- Methods
- Results
- Discussion
- Acknowledgements.

If you are presenting an area of practice development your content will be different and so the layout will also need to be adjusted. We have attempted to demonstrate this in *Figures 1* and *2*.

Step 3 – Developing the abstract and title
If an abstract is required it is important that it is clear, focused, easily understood and outlines the content of the poster. The abstract should capture the interest of the audience and entice them to read on further. The title of your poster is also very important and should accurately describe the content of the poster. Short and creative is often thought to be best (Jackson and Sheldon, 2000) but do not get so creative that people have no idea what your poster is about. For example, '*A Shepherd Without a Flock: Predetermined Chaos or Facilitated Survival*' is a snappy title but what does it mean? This was actually a title developed to provide a novel, catchy representation of the content, which was a student and lecturers' first experiences of problem-based learning. On reflection, it was too creative and did not let the audience know what the poster was about. It would have been better to have written, '*A Student and Lecturers' First Experiences of Problem-Based Learning*'. It is worthwhile spending time to develop your title and ask your colleagues for their opinion. After all, a title has failed in its aim if only the presenter understands it.

Along with the title should be a clear indication of authors and affiliations, sometimes Trust or institution logos are also included here. It is important that all contributors' names are listed as this clearly establishes credit for their input. The issue of granting credit for poster development to those who have offered few contributions runs parallel to the rights of authorship in published works (Moore et al, 2001). Issues surrounding authorship of published works are often so sensitive and highly debated that suggestions and guidance for assigning authorship have been established and published (Duncan, 1999). Authorship criteria should be borne in mind and discussed at the earliest opportunity as it can lead to misunderstanding if left. For example, if a colleague proof read or reviewed your poster and subsequent alterations were made – does that constitute credit for contribution as an author or a thank you over glass of wine? To make the process of publication and dissemination run smoothly, define contributors' roles at the beginning and give credit where credit is due.

Step 4 – Introduction
The introduction should clearly define the topic and demonstrate what was studied or implemented and why. This provides the rationale and importance of the topic presented. It is usual to see references to key literature as this can add weight to your rationale but be careful not to include too many as there simply isn't the room. It may well be the case that you have performed an extensive literature review but you should only include key texts in the introduction. The introduction can consist of text or bullet points depending on your personal preference, but as with all sections on the poster, the introduction needs to be clear and concise. If you do chose the text format it is important that it is kept to a minimum so you may wish to consider the use of bullet points to provide impact, focus and clarity. If you are presenting research, you should include your research questions and/or hypotheses in this section.

Don't ever expect anyone to spend more than 3–5 minutes at your poster. If you can't clearly convey your message in less time than this, the chances are you haven't done your job properly (Block, 1996). So again – less is more.

Step 5 – Methods
The methods section should explain clearly what you did and how you did it. For example, if it is research you would need to communicate your method, data collection, tools and analysis, sample and sampling strategy, and maybe outcome measures if appropriate. If you are discussing a developmental change or initiative you need to outline how you went about the change – you need to communicate the developmental stages. In either case you can make good use of diagrams or illustrations here. Illustrations, graphs and diagrams should be clear and readable from a distance of 1.5 meters.
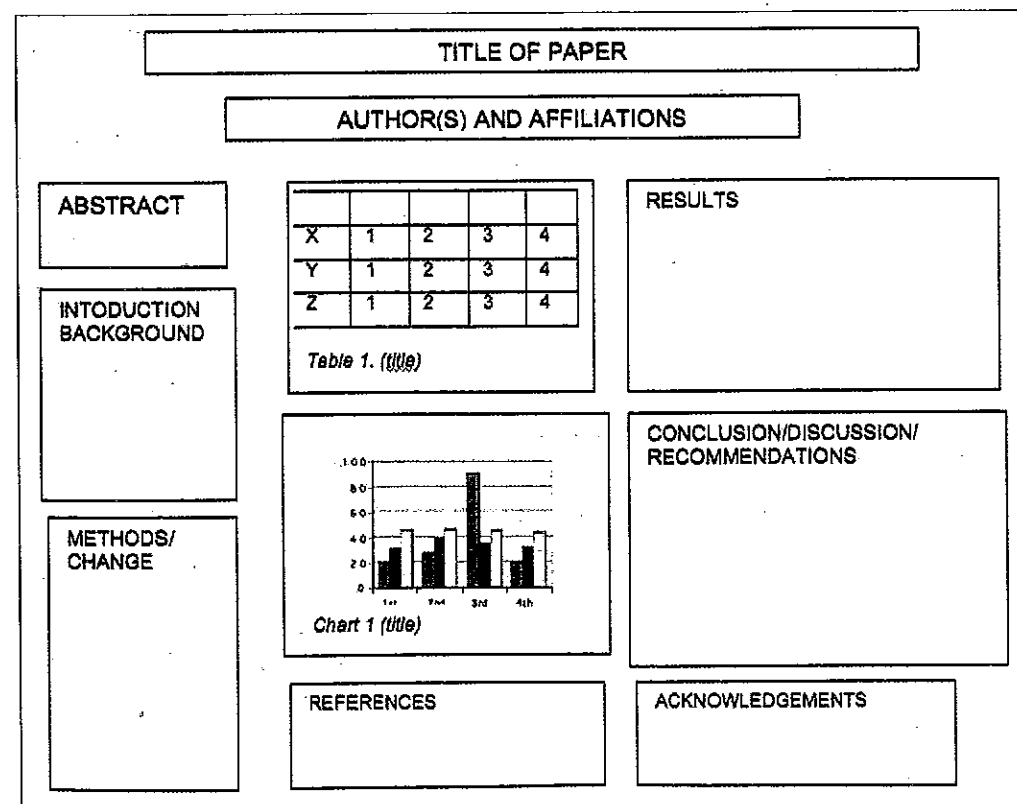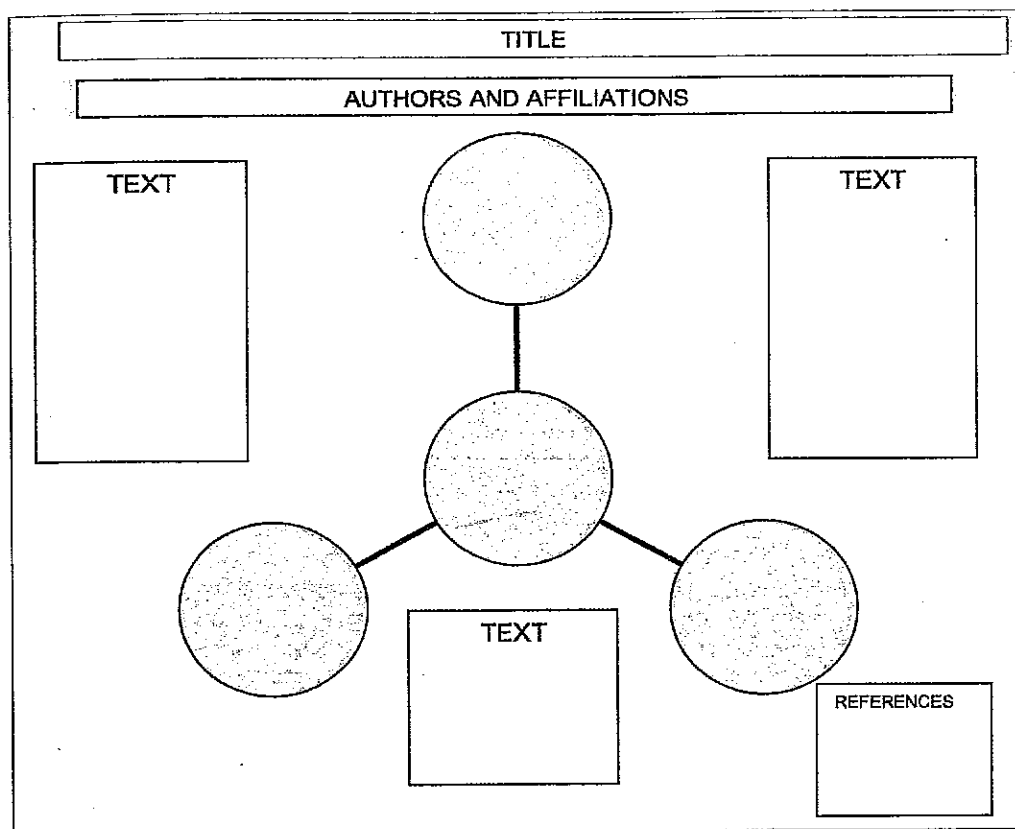

TITLE OF PAPER

AUTHOR(S) AND AFFILIATIONS

ABSTRACT

INTODUCTION BACKGROUND

METHODS/ CHANGE

X	1	2	3	4
Y	1	2	3	4
Z	1	2	3	4

Table 1. (title)

Chart 1 (title)

RESULTS

CONCLUSION/DISCUSSION/ RECOMMENDATIONS

REFERENCES

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Figure 1. Typical layout of a poster disseminating research.

The depth of information delivered is not the same as it would be if it was published in journal but it should still cover all the stages in enough depth to communicate the key areas.

Step 6 – Results
This section outlines what you found in your study and should include your statistical analysis. This can be achieved effectively with the use of tables, graphs and figures to clarify and communicate your results. All tables and figures should be clear, self-explanatory and above all, uncomplicated. If you are presenting a qualitative study, this section would include the themes generated. If you are presenting practice development, this section would include the impact the change had on practice, how it was received, etc.

Step 7 – Discussion and acknowledgements
This section is an important section and as you are trying to communicate what your results actually mean and what the implications are. For example, how can the results benefit practice? Are there any recommendations for further study or changes? What were the limitations of the study? This section should be directly linked to the results section as it is not satisfactory to discuss implications based on results that you have not already

communicated. Make it clear what the value of your study or initiative is. Again the use of bullet points can be useful in providing clarity and impact to sell your work to the audience.

Step 8 – Putting it all together
OK, so you have altered, adjusted, identified and began to organize your content. Now is the time to put it all together. There are a number of ways you can do this but what is important is that you adhere to the conference guidelines. All organizers will produce guidelines outlining the maximum size and dimensions of the poster (portrait or landscape). This is usually dictated by the size and dimensions of the free standing presentation boards used by the conference organizers. These guidelines must be adhered to as there is nothing more frustrating and embarrassing than arriving with a poster that does not fit on the display board. In addition to this, because of the difficulties with cutting down the content, if sizes were not stipulated we are sure presenters would chance their arm and arrive with posters the size of a mural! So be clear about the dimensions and size, if you are uncertain you must check.

There a two main ways a poster can be constructed, either one sheet of paper (laminated or unlaminated) or a series of mounted cards that are then mounted to the display board. Both

methods have their advantages and disadvantages and are subject to personal preference. If using individually mounted cards the sequence would follow the same layout as described earlier but, again, make sure they fit the display board. The advantages of individual display cards are that they are relatively cheap and simple to produce and can be altered easily if errors are found. If you decide to produce a poster on one sheet there are a number of options you can chose from. Once you have used a template to organize your poster content you can then either produce the poster on a computer using Microsoft PowerPoint© or contact your medical illustrations department. If you are working with the illustration department it is important that you allow plenty of time for them to design and print your poster. It is important to work with them at every stage and ask for a proof before the poster is printed as mistakes cannot afterwards be rectified. If you have produced your own poster you can easily have this printed at a local print shop and many also offer lamination services at a competitive rate.

Step 9 – Seek advice
If this is the first time you have produced a poster it is very important to seek advice. Do not fall into the trap of 'going it alone' for fear of criticism from colleagues when discussing your ideas with them. It is far better to discuss and outline your ideas among your own colleagues than be judged by an audience you do not know. Being comfortable with your poster is a huge part of preparing for the big day so find out who has developed and presented a poster and ask their advice. Make sure your poster is checked by a number of people. Preparing a poster can take time and as such you may miss simple errors and spelling mistakes. This can give an impression of carelessness and look unprofessional.

Step 10 – The day of presentation
The preparation and production of a poster is a complex and arduous task but it is not over yet. There are many things to consider when presenting the poster to your audience. First of all you have to get the poster there in good condition. If you have individual boards make sure they are transported in a case that is rigid and does not bend. If you have a full sized poster you must transport it in a poster tube, these are supplied by the printers or are available from stationary shops. Arrive early to put your poster up. You will be allocated a display number so you will know which board to display your poster on. The next consideration is how to secure your poster to

the display board. Be sure to take with you a selection of drawing pins and adhesive hook and loop fasteners to secure your poster as these are not usually supplied by the organizers. Many delegates appreciate small prints of your poster and/or contact details (either a business card or compliment slips), these can also be secured to the board in plastic pockets and gives the message that you want people to contact you for further information.

So, your poster is secured to the correct display board, it fits the board and you have arranged your contact details and handouts. The next thing to consider is how you then present it to your audience. Some conference organizers arrange 'poster walks' where groups of people will visit your poster for viewing at certain predetermined times. Under these circumstances you are required to deliver a short presentation and talk the audience through your poster who will then ask you questions. The other method is where you are expected to stand by your poster during poster viewing times and discuss it with those who show an interest. Which ever

method your conference requires, there is one common theme – preparation. Remember, if the poster communicates key points you need to communicate the rest and this is achieved by answering delegates' questions.
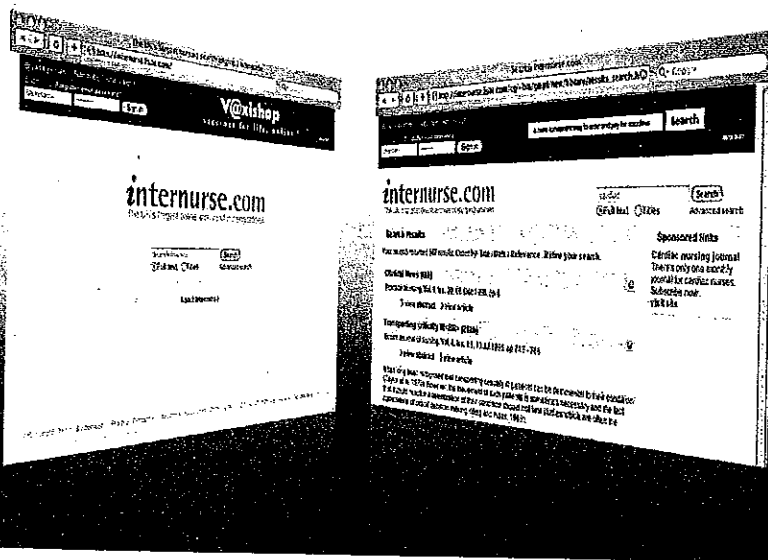
There is an art to enticing your audience to move closer to discuss your poster with you. Always make sure you stand to the side of your poster and don't exclude others from conversations by turning your back on them. Allow people the space and time to ingest your poster – let them consider it and approach you. We will again use the analogy of the car boot sale. Many 'car booters' walk around the stalls keeping track of items they wish to go back to and the same can be said of poster viewers. If someone is on their first browse and you are over eager to discuss you findings it can be very off putting and may even stop them from coming back to you if they felt hassled. You need to get the balance right, give them time and if you do catch their eye, smile ... and wait. Some people find it intimidating and/or embarrassing to approach a poster presenter so you need to consider this.

Once your poster has been secured it does not mean you can leave it there and visit the sites or go shopping. You have to sell your poster and take full advantage of the ability to network and make new contacts. Finally, enjoy the experience and be proud of yourself. You have been selected to present your work and you should feel a sense of accomplishment for your efforts, this is especially true when you see your poster hanging for the first time. Reward yourself when your work is done and try to capture your efforts with a photograph for dissemination throughout your institution. ▪

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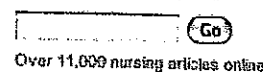Shelledy DC (2004) How to make an effective poster. *Respir Care* 49(10): 1213–16