

## The perfect poster

Experts reveal the art behind displaying your science.

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Poster sessions offer a chance for many eyes to see your hard work — and some of those visitors may open doors to interesting research collaboration, postdoc or career opportunities. The trick is making your poster stand out among the hundreds of others.

"A good poster is not just tacking a standard research paper on poster board," says Kathryn Tosney, PhD, a neurobiologist and chair of the biology department at the University of Miami who created a poster-making guide to help her own students. "An effective poster helps you engage colleagues in conversation and gets your main points across to as many people as possible."

Here are a few hints to draw a crowd:

- **Focus on findings.** The first thing people will look at is the poster's title, says Warren Street, PhD, a professor emeritus of psychology at Central Washington University who's judged poster sessions for years. The title should let people know what your poster is about in one brief sentence, he says. "You're marketing your ideas," he says. "Look for a simple, effective message that invites people into conversation." In the body of the poster, use short, declarative sentences to explain what you found and why it matters. Limit your methods section to a few sentences — if someone wants the nitty-gritty, they'll ask. "Providing endless details detracts from the point of your poster," Tosney says. "Simple messages are more memorable."
- **Emphasize graphics.** At a convention, your poster will probably be one fish in a large sea. Charts, graphs and pictures will make your poster pop, says George Hess, PhD, a professor at North Carolina State University who collaborated with Tosney to create an online poster-making guide (<http://www.ncsu.edu/project/posters>) . "There's real power in turning your information into simple, clean graphical representations to communicate data relationships."
- **Avoid 'chart junk.'** Unnecessary grid lines, labels, keys and other extraneous information undermine your main message, Tosney says. Let the data speak for itself as much as possible, Hess adds. Daniel Baughn, a clinical psychology and behavioral medicine grad student at Virginia Commonwealth University, recommends using poster design software (<http://www.poster-genius.com>) , which automatically balances image sizes with the rest of the poster's materials.
- **Choose colors wisely.** "Go for simplicity and stick to two or three colors that really stand out against your background," Hess says. More than that will overload and confuse your readers. In general, dark colors against a white background show up better than light colors against a dark background, especially in dimmer convention halls. Also, apply colors consistently, with section titles all the same hue. Finally, Hess says, keep in mind that 7 percent to 10 percent of men have red-green colorblindness, so don't put those colors adjacent to each other.
- **Leave white space.** Don't jam every square inch of your poster with graphs and text, says Street. Leaving space between poster elements will make it easier to read.
- **Aim for symmetry.** If you have a graphic element in the top left, try to include one in the bottom right, as well. A 1994 study in *Nature* found that humans have an aesthetic preference for symmetrical things, be they people or patterns (Vol.

372, No. 2). A poster that's image-heavy on either end throws off people's natural affinity for symmetry. Graphics in the middle of your poster are fine, but don't overload the poster edges, Tosney adds.

- **Design for your readers' eyes.** Designer and communication researcher Colin Wheildon, author of "Type & Layout" (Worsley Press, 2005), explains that most people from Western reading backgrounds will read your poster from top to bottom, then left to right. So lay out your information in columns that follow this path. You can number your sections and include simple flowchart marks to further guide your reader's gaze. One thing you don't want to do is get too unusual with your layout, says Hess. It's more important for your poster to be readable than clever.
- **Mind the details.** Include your full contact information. If you go off to look at other posters or get lunch, you might miss someone who's interested in talking to you. Also, have printouts of your poster that include a few explanatory sentences on either a separate page or along the bottom.

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Download APA's poster instructions (</convention/poster-instructions.pdf>) (PDF, 965KB).

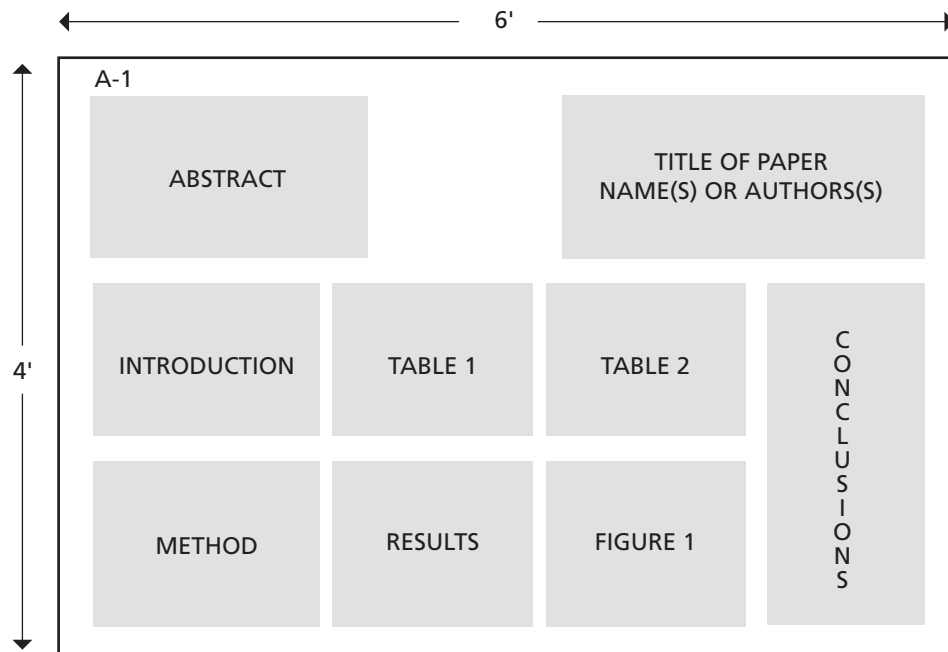
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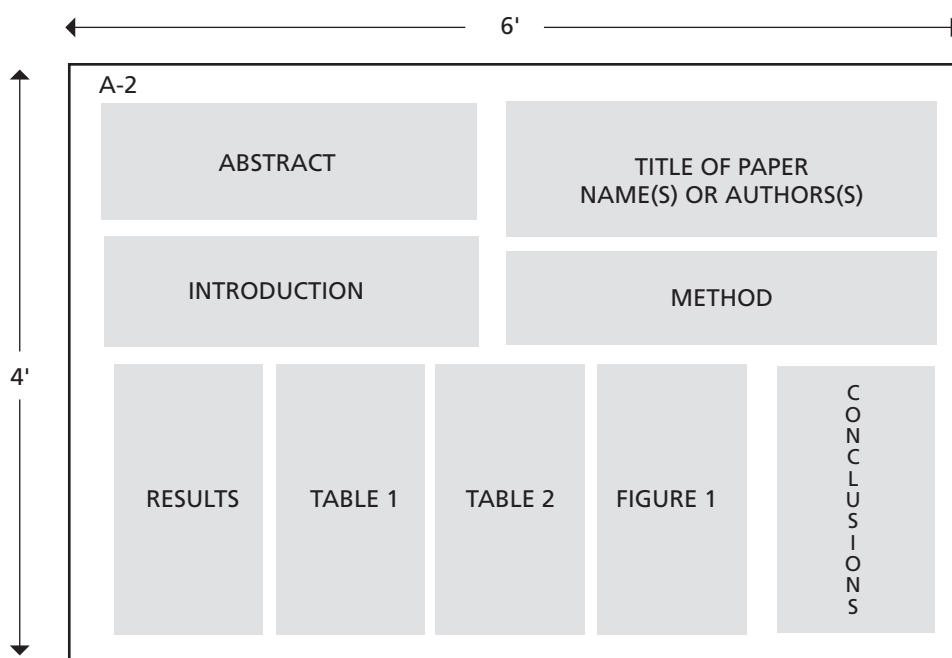
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# SAMPLE POSTER ARRANGEMENTS

1



2



3

