The Poster Poster: Reeling in the Audience
Chris McLaughlin and Laura Currey, MA
Department of Family and Community Medicine, Medical College of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, WI

Do What the Guide(line)s Say1,2,3

1. Follow evidence of visual tracking for posters. Viewers track posters in Z-pattern (Fig. A). We “read” that way and/or in newspaper column sequence (Fig. B). This poster tracks both ways, starting at focal point (target) to top left to bottom right.

Plan and Prepare
Take enough time to organize, incorporate feedback, edit, and refine. Below is an ideal one-month timeline.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Days</th>
<th>1–7</th>
<th>8–14</th>
<th>15–21</th>
<th>22–29</th>
<th>30</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gather info</td>
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<tr>
<td>Determine main message, start writing</td>
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<td>Create thumbnail sketch</td>
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<td>Layout hardcopy sections</td>
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<tr>
<td>Move around and edit</td>
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<td>Get feedback from “experts” and others</td>
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<tr>
<td>Edit, finalize copy and poster, proofread</td>
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<tr>
<td>Drop at printer or assemble</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

2. Make it big, clear, consistent, readable
- 1-2 fonts readable from 4 feet
- Light background, dark letters (exception: titles, headers)
- Avoid jargon
- Guide viewers with descriptive headers (if possible) or other guideposts, e.g.:
  - Instead of Discussion, use Main Points, Answers, Questions
  - Instead of Conclusion, use What This Means, Take Away
- Other guideposts include arrows, numbers, icons

3. Limit text
- Text supports figures, not vice versa
- 1-3 take-away points
- ≤1000 words
- ≤10 lines per text block
- Bullets, list—not paragraphs, sentences
- White space 40-50%

4. Cut and edit with a sharp knife
- Follow meeting requirements
- Introduction: 1-3 sentences
- Methods: keep short, most don’t read
- Results: only most important ones (including negative)

Know Your Audience and “Habitat”

“A hot, congested room filled with people who are there primarily to socialize”. . .”

1. Use the right lures to get attention -You have 11 seconds:
   - Use an interesting title
   - Catch their eye with pleasing graphics
   - that support the theme and show emphasis
   - Show why the viewer should care

2. Set the hook - In 1 minute, viewers should know:
   - Authors
   - Purpose/objective
   - Main point

3. Reel them in - 2 more minutes to engage them:
   - Make it a conversation, not a silent read

Wrap It Up: Ask Yourself

1. What do I want viewers to remember? Can they get the gist in 1-2 minutes?
2. Have I stripped away fat but included all the needed information?
3. Is it visually pleasing?
4. Can they follow it? Have I made the important points (if possible) or other guideposts, e.g.:
   - White space 40-50%
   - Use an interesting title
   - Make it a conversation, not a silent read

References

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Don’t Forget Your Basic Tackle
A surprising number of posters at scientific meetings fail to bring the basics to their “fishing” expedition. At one international science congress, reviewers applied set criteria to 142 posters. Here’s what they found.4

Your Purpose Is to Land a Fish
“Present the bare bones of your data in graphic form so as to pique the interest of passersby who might . . . stop and discuss your work in more detail.”

“4 Department of Family and Community Medicine, Medical College of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, WI

You’ve got a whale of a tale to tell. But do your posters tell the story effectively? Or are the main points lost in a sea of text and images?

Main Point
A poster is not a mini-manuscript. It’s a visual medium to telegraph information fast. And there’s evidence about what works. We’ve netted some of the evidence and advice from the guidelines to help you catch your limit.