TRIO

RONALD E. McNAIR POST BACCALAUREATE PROGRAM

POSTER DESIGN GUIDE

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PLANNING

When you are accepted as a participant in a poster session, you'll be given a set of Guidelines for Presenters. These guidelines provide very specific information. Although every show is different, the guidelines typically will tell you the size of your display area, how long the show will be, and expectations. Some poster session organizers include tips or suggestions for you to consider that are based on their past experience.

- Know your audience so that you can communicate to them most effectively.
- Text should be large enough to be seen from 5 feet away.
- The pieces should be organized in a way that leads the viewer through the display.
- Make illustrations simple and bold.
- The display should be self-explanatory so that you are free to talk.
- Keep displays simple and text brief; a viewer should "get it" in 30 seconds. You can provide in-depth information in a handout.
- A neutral colored poster on matte board is more pleasing to the eye than one on a bright colored background.
- Organize your material and edit your content to eliminate distracting visual noise. When in doubt, edit out; make sure every item is necessary.
- Take a note pad and pen for notes, extra thumbtacks, pins, tape or glue.

How to get started:
It's important to know who will view your poster and what you want to tell them. Don't wait until the last minute; start early.

Keep it simple
List all of the things that you want to say, and put them in the order of importance. Try selecting only the first three points as the focus for your poster.
Remember that this is a poster to give a quick overview of your research and to encourage viewers to stop to talk with you.
Plan on limited text and strong images in the poster. Provide deeper information in a well-written handout.
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Develop an information hierarchy
What is your key point? What do you need to support it?
Would bulleted points be more effective than running text?
Starting with an outline, which is an information hierarchy, will help you simplify and plan.

Think visually
Take out a pencil and sketch a small poster to scale. What size and proportions will you be working with? What will you include? What resources do you have and what do you need to add or eliminate to create a good poster?

IF YOUR AUDIENCE REMEMBERS ONE THING
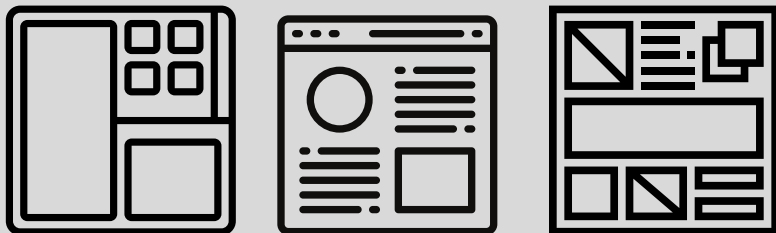*what should it be?*

DEVELOPING A LAYOUT

The most important things go first.

The title is top center, the key position. Next, viewers look at the upper left; there you can put an introduction that briefly states the question you're asking and why it's important. Follow with what you did and how you did it. Include simple supporting information. Your conclusions come last. Capture the viewer's attention, then guide them visually through your information.

Use a grid to keep items aligned and straight.

If you do the layout on a computer, aligning things is easier. If you need to put things together manually, make sure items align, edges are straight and margins are even.

Use a Text Hierarchy

A text hierarchy means that you've established a convention with font sizes and styles that lets viewers easily recognize the order of importance of information in the poster.

The most important bit of text is the title; it's the largest text on the poster and usually in a bold font. You might use text 1½ inches tall for the title, make it bold and perhaps use all capital letters.

Next is the names of the participants and their department affiliations. If the title is 1½ inches high you can use ¾ inch to 1 inch tall letters for your names and a bit smaller text for departments.

Use a combination of upper and lower case letters. The names could be made more prominent by making them bold.

Next might be subheadings stating what you did, why you did it and what you discovered. These could be ½ inch or larger, each followed by indented bulleted points or running text.

Use a Column Format

Your title will usually go across the top of the entire poster. The content should be arranged under it in columns: 3, 4, or 5 depending on the width of your poster. People expect to read from the upper left corner down each successive column till they reach the lower right corner. Your layout should guide the viewer's eye; adhering to this standard takes advantage of the viewer's expectations.

DEVELOPING A LAYOUT

White Space

White space, which is only white if your background is white, is the space around images and text. It fills borders, helps to keep things separate, can keep things together, and can be used to focus the viewers attention.

Students often make the mistake of trying to fill all of their poster in their enthusiasm to include as much as possible. Even your favorite teacher may find a poster filled from edge to edge a bit intimidating. You want people to find the information easily and feel that they can absorb it quickly and comfortably while standing at a poster fair. Open space helps give them this impression and invites them to read.

Try to keep 40% of the poster area empty of text and images.

Limit your use of boxes and lines.

If you put text and images in boxes and separate the columns and sections with lines, your poster will look like it's still on a grid. The lines stop the viewers eyes from scanning smoothly, and it becomes difficult to scan the entire poster. You can achieve an orderly poster with white space.

If items go together, put them close to each other.

Keep a photograph or illustration near where it's discussed in the text.

SELECTING FONTS AND USING TEXT

STANDARDS

A common font that's included with every computer operating system is Times Roman. The problem with Times (and it's sans serif partner, Helvetica) is that it's so common designers think of it as boring. But it's okay to use Times since you want the fonts that you use to stand out because of the information they convey rather than for their novelty.

BODY TEXT

A font should be readable. Make it easy for folks who don't have much time to get the information they need. If viewers are familiar with a font, reading speed and comprehension are improved.
In print media, serif fonts are easiest to read and provide quick comprehension: the small finishing strokes guide the eye and the variation in stroke width aids character recognition. Convention, what people are most accustomed to, suggests choosing one of the common serif fonts for body copy. For example, there are a number of serif fonts that are considered "safe," like Palatino; others include Garamond, Bembo, Janson, Baskerville, Goudy and Times.

USE SANS SERIF FONTS FOR TITLES, HEADLINES, OR LABELS.

Sans serif fonts work well for titles and labels because of the clarity and simplicity of the letter forms. Without the distinctive serif strokes, however, sans serif fonts can be difficult and tiring to read. Sans serif fonts for headlines and titles can mix well with serif fonts in the body; but you can also use a larger, bolder version of your serif font in the title.

Not every sans serif font works well with every serif font; if your combination of two fonts doesn't look right, try a different sans serif font. The sans font Helvetica is often paired with Times Roman.

SELECTING FONTS AND USING TEXT

3 FONT RULE

If you use more than three fonts your information hierarchy gets confusing, order is hard to maintain, and your poster starts to look disorganized.

If the body copy is Times and the title is Helvetica, that's two fonts. Adding Times Italic for photo captions makes three. If you then use Times Italic Bold for a sub head, you're adding a fourth font, and the orderly look of the poster gets harder to maintain. If you need the font for clarity that can't be achieved another way, use it; clarity of communication is the goal, not a specific number of fonts.

COMBINE UPPERCASE & LOWERCASE

Quick and easy word recognition helps people effortlessly read a text. If you use all capital letters, the shape of every word ia a rectangle; reading becomes more difficult. The ascending strokes above an h, b, or d and the descending strokes below a g, p, or j all help to create a distinctive shape for a word. This shape makes the word easier to recognize. The differences in shapes also help the reader maintain their place as they're reading.

USE LARGE FONTS THAT CAN BE EASILY READ FROM 5 FEET AWAY.

Take two steps back from a test print out. Can you read the text? Do the headlines command attention? Body copy should be no smaller than ¼ inch— that's at least 18 points. Some sources recommend using body copy that's 24 points. Obviously this limits the amount of text that you can include!

Your title should be about 1½ inches tall— that will usually be at least 120 points.

VISIBILITY

Text has to stand out clearly against the background to be seen and read. Black text on white has the highest visibility and readability. For your poster to be read quickly and easily, you need to maintain high contrast between the text and background.

CHOOSING AND USING COLOR

ATMOSPHERE   01.

Are there any colors already in place that you could use? Colors that are natural to your project, such as green for botanical research or blue for ocean studies are great starting points. Colors could be implied by locale or culture or could be the color of a team tee shirt.

Photographs that you want to include hold lots of colors that you can sample in a graphics application to use for image borders, bullets or "dingbats," or muted backgrounds. Colors found in these ways will help to pull your poster together.

COLOR SCHEME   02.

Two or three related colors will give your poster a cohesive look. The colors need to go together well enough that they don't conflict with your message.

If you use a standard twelve section color wheel, any three neighboring colors will work well together. For contrast in small quantities, the color directly across the color wheel can add impact.

COLOR THEORY   03.

Keep backgrounds subtle; grays and muted colors help foreground information standout

Use bright, saturated colors sparingly.

Large amounts of red, yellow or orange can overpower your message.

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USING IMAGES

A PICTURE IS WORTH

1,000 words

GETTING STARTED

Do you have photos that were taken during your work? Did you create graphs and charts that could be simplified and colorized? People are drawn to photos of people; could you stage some photos to point out key points of your message? Can you change tables into simple charts? Any images that you can provide will be a help. Outside sources are a possibility, but don't forget to get permission to use items that you didn't create.

USE MEANINGFUL, HIGH-QUALITY IMAGES

Whether it's an illustration, a photograph, a chart or a graph, make sure that it supports the focus of your poster. It needs to convey information. When you use an image, you tell the viewer that you think the information in the image is important. If they can't easily see the importance, their attention will be lost.

EDIT IMAGES & PHOTOS

Software such as Photoshop can enable you to adjust color casts, brightness, contrast, and focus. It usually can't make a bad image good, but it can often make an average shot look a bit more professional.

Crop or edit images so the important information is obvious.

Give photos short titles or captions. Even if you've managed to reduce your text to a minimum throughout your poster, some people still won't read it. Titles and captions on images help viewers to quickly understand what they're looking at.

PLACEMENT

Place images so that they're balanced visually in the poster and they help to lead the viewer's eye through the material.

Don't place all of your images on one side of the poster. Images should be spread evenly over the surface, pulling the viewers eyes to all areas.

USING VISUAL DATA

Label directly on maps, charts, and graphs.

Label data lines in graphs and sections on pie charts; avoid using legends (keys). Legends require the viewer to work hard at understanding the meaning of an image. If directly labeled, the viewer can understand a graph in one glance.

Also keep in mind that viewers can't turn your poster to read vertical text. Keep all labels horizontal.

Simplify charts and graphs.

Remove non-essential information. If you don't mention the specific data on the poster, remove it from the image. Reduce the data in your images to what you need to make your point.

If you have very complex data, include a more complex image in your handout. Tables are often complex. If they can't be simplified or summarized, put these tables in the handout, too.

Use bold lines in graphs so the data can be seen and understood from 5 feet away.

Lines on graphs should be made heavier than usual. They have to be seen and understood quickly. Sections in charts and graphs should be distinct as well; use different colors to clearly establish separations and relationships.

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