

Giving Poster Presentations

Poster presentations are an excellent opportunity to use multiple communication channels to represent what you have done or learned. While not a traditional presentation, poster sessions give you a different communication experience.

Considering the Audience

As with any presentation, you should consider who is likely to be listening. In some cases, your audience is going to be people who know a fair bit about your topic or discipline. In other cases, such as a poster session for a family weekend, you are likely to get some people who know the topic, but also many more people who are just curious about the research that is going on. You should plan to adapt based on the person with whom you are interacting. Ask yourself: what does this person likely know and what will they want to know?

Preparing a Pitch

You should plan for having a short (about 2 minutes) summary overview of the project that can give a listener a taste of what you did. You can use that time to answer three big questions:

1. What is the topic?
2. What did you find? Or What are the results?
3. Why is this important?

People will ask follow-up questions if they are interested in learning more or if they are confused about something you said. Think of this pitch as an appetizer: you want to whet someone's appetite to learn more about your topic, but that small bite may be sufficient for some people.

When thinking about the pitch, keep in mind that you do not need to verbally address every component of the poster in your first remarks. You should, however, be prepared to talk about each component if asked. You should never read directly from the poster to the audience!

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Posters with a Partner

If you worked on your project with another person, you should both be prepared to give the basic pitch. You may have parts of the project that each of you is more comfortable talking about in detail, but each of you should know the fundamentals in case you are asked. Then, you can pass off a question to the other person if necessary.

Preparing for Questions

You should anticipate questions from the people who view your poster. One part of your preparation can be brainstorming the likely questions and then practicing answering those questions. If you are presenting your poster at a professional meeting with other people from the discipline, you can expect more technical or content questions than if you are presenting to a more general audience. Some likely general questions you may get are:

- What made you interested in this topic?
- Why was this approach/tool/theory the most appropriate for your project?
- Where do you go from here with this research?
- What was the most interesting/surprising/challenging part of this project?
- How does this project relate to other work you are doing?

Regardless of the question, it's ok to take a breath and focus before you start to answer. Your response should be focused and succinct as well as appropriate for the audience. If you aren't sure what someone is asking, ask for clarification!

Ideally, the poster session will give you an opportunity to engage in a dialogue about your work. In fact, that's one of the main draws of posters as a way to disseminate research findings.

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Interacting with Your Poster

You and your poster are a team, working together to present your ideas. Once your poster is mounted, you should position yourself so that you are close to your poster but not blocking it from passersby, especially the title.

Additionally:

- You should feel free to move as necessary to show different parts of the poster.
- Gesture to the relevant parts of the poster. You should use your whole hand to point toward something rather than just pointing a finger. Graphs and other data are excellent parts of a poster for gesturing.
- Avoid turning your back on your audience to gesture.
- Use the arm closest to the poster to gesture so you are not gesturing across your body or turning.
- Avoid standing with your arms crossed or otherwise looking defensive both while talking and while waiting for an audience. Closed off body language makes you appear less welcoming for someone to approach.
- Don't forget to smile. Even if you are feeling nervous, you can "fake it 'til you make it" by adopting a smile and acting confident.

