Creating a Message-Driven Poster

Creating a clear, concise message (or set of messages) is a critical communication skill. Being clear about your message can help you organize any presentation, whether it is in front of a single reporter or an auditorium full of your colleagues. Scientific posters are no exception. Here, we provide some helpful tips on how to use a clear sense of message to develop a more effective poster.

- **Start with the end in mind—Know your objective.**
  Your first instinct may be to try to distill an existing paper or begin outlining your methods, analysis, results, conclusions, etc. Resist. A poster is not a mini-paper; it is an opportunity to engage a certain group of colleagues in a discussion of your research. Forget about what will actually go on the poster for a minute. Think ahead to the poster session itself. What do you hope to achieve? Are you seeking feedback on your findings? Are you looking for help identifying your next research question? Are you hoping to identify a new collaborator? When the session is over, what will success look like?

- **You Talking to Me? Know your audience.**
  Related to your objective, with whom do you want to communicate. The meeting at which the poster session will take place will give you a sense of the types of people who will be there. Are they generalists or specialists? Is it an interdisciplinary group? Understanding who you want to engage will help you make important decisions about which aspects of your research you should focus on and which can be placed on a handout or be left for another time.

- **As I was Saying—What you want to communicate to that audience**
  With a sense of your objective and audience, you should now focus on your message—that is, what it is you want to say to your intended audience in the service of your objective. Identify one-three key take-away messages about your research. These should describe why your research and your findings are important and perhaps what you hope others will do. If nothing else, what do you want your audience to remember about this poster and your research. If you have already written a paper, your abstract and your conclusions are a good place to look for these take-away messages. Write them down into concise, jargon-free statements. Now you are ready to begin building your poster.

- **Worth a 1,000 Words (at least)—Find the graphic that carries that message**
  The next step is to identify the one table, graph, chart, photograph, or other visual element that best describes your message. Often we have several charts or tables on a poster, but find ourselves spending most of our presentation about the poster focusing on just one graphic. Know which one that is and…

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- **Design from that visual element out**
  Enlarge your key graphic, give it a prominent place on the poster (e.g., center-top (or perhaps center-right), then take the rest of the information on the poster (background, methods, findings, etc.) and design the poster around that visual. This will encourage viewers to focus their attention on the part of your research that really matters.

- **Boldface—Use an interesting title and "What we learned" to carry your message**
  In addition to using a strong graphic, create a title that not only describes your research, but effectively communicates your message and entices the viewer into the poster. Perhaps most importantly, resist the temptation to place your conclusions or findings on the bottom right part of the poster where they are traditionally put. Create a "What We Learned" section in large type just under the title. That way, the casual viewer can see what the poster is all about from a safe distance (no one wants to get stuck spending time on the wrong poster). This will help viewers "get" your message and then make the determination about whether they want to stay and talk or move on.

- **Message your "talk"**
  Often, we spend a great deal of time thinking about, designing and producing a poster, but forget to think about what we are going to say at the poster session itself. In fact, an effective poster is simply an informative visual aid, an information-rich backdrop for what should be a series of energetic conversations. To that end, once you have figured out your message, develop and then practice a 15-30 second introduction to your poster that explains your research, why it is important, and what you found. Then, if you have time, prepare and practice a 1-2 minute description of the research and its key details. Again, make sure you hit your key messages, and don't forget to think about some leading questions you might ask a viewer to begin a conversation and prompt their interest in your work.

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