

Maitreya's Stream of Consciousness Poster Presentation Guide

Introduction

Have you been to a poster session? Given a poster?

Ask yourself what you did and didn't like about the experience, as a presenter and a consumer.

What are you looking for from the experience?

Start with the Abstract

Careful with the abstract. State your results clearly, but don't oversell.

Also, think about what results you want to discuss publicly. Abstracts are typically published on the web and I have stalked many a competitor this way (try it!)

Never put anything in your abstract that hasn't been done! This is 1. scientific fraud and 2. a curse to your experiments.

No harm in requesting a talk, but discuss with your PI to be sure.

Make your title brief and clear.

Outlining the poster

Organize your thoughts into an outline. What should you cover?

I typically reserve 1/3 abstract+background, 1/2 results, 1/6 conclusions and future directions.

What's essential to your story? What's a coherent path through the project?

Take an 8.5x11 piece of paper and draw the outline. Consult the meeting guidelines for size requirements. Don't be the person who shows up with a landscape poster when the boards are all portrait-sized!

Designing and printing the poster

Design your layout in your program of choice. Powerpoint is surprisingly good, just resize the slide. You may want to talk with the IT folks to be sure about margin and size settings for the printer, otherwise you'll be in for unpleasant surprises when you go to print.

Watchwords are clear, informative, and visually appealing.

Good advice from a science journalist who attends many meetings: "I've noticed the good ones are clear to people outside their immediate field. I'd think about writing two sentences -- one about your purpose, one about your conclusion -- before you start the poster. Set them aside. Look at them again when you're done -- those sentences, or some form of them, should be there somewhere."

Err on the side of visuals over text every time! The biggest block of text on your poster should probably be your abstract.

Include enough information that a person can follow the poster without you there, but don't be overly detailed. Frequently posters are left up for the whole meeting, so the majority of the audience might be viewing your poster this way.

Determine what information you're comfortable sharing at this point. Competitors may be present. This is both an opportunity for good discussion with people who really know your field, but also a chance for more ruthless competitors to see what you're working on. I err on the side of openness because I get better ideas and interest, and I only have one competitor I would put in the "hostile" camp. Your paranoia may vary.

Think of your audience. At the retreat, you probably don't need to explain how exome sequencing works in extreme detail. At a very general meeting, you might want to include more background. Your audience may include undergrads, journalists, people in completely different fields, and experts. There should be something for everyone.

Make sure to use a readable font, especially in legends and labels. Imagine a crowd around your poster and the person in the back is trying to read it. Imagine the person scanning titles to decide whether to stop by your poster.

Be clear about what you did and what you plan to do. Posters sometimes blur background with results, which can make it difficult to capture the essence of your project and focus on what's new.

One arresting figure can make a poster. Work at it, and even "boring" data can be presented well. Data visualization is a growing field with more and more graphic design influence.

Good figures can be reused for the paper and in talks! Poster presentations are a great time to take your lame lab meeting Powerpoints and make them into something high quality.

You want to stand out, but don't make it gimmicky. Something more lighthearted can work for a retreat or other less formal setting, but be very careful. Again, know your audience.

Print out your poster scaled on an 8.5x11 sheet of paper. If you can read the whole thing, your font size is big enough.

Plan well ahead of time so you don't end up at Kinko's in the middle of the night spending \$50 on the poster. Know where the Kinko's is, though, and its hours in case disaster strikes and you are an anxious sort. When traveling, you might even look this up ahead of time. Posters get lost on airplanes! I always bring mine carry on if I can.

Colors don't always reproduce as you think they will. If your first printout isn't to your liking, print another one. This may only be possible if you leave enough advance time that the printer isn't swamped with other last minute jobs.

Presenting the poster

Get your PI/friends to funnel people to your poster. If anyone from your lab or collaborators is giving a talk, send them your poster #, title, and presentation time so they can advertise for you (sent this well ahead of time in case they need to turn their talk in early). If you meet people during breaks who you'd like to talk more with, mention your poster and when you'll be presenting.

Some people like to include a handout of the printed poster (remember that shrunken printout?) I am agnostic about this practice, but I have picked them up in the past.

Secure your poster well (don't skimp on the pushpins) and make sure to be courteous to your neighbors.

Be prompt to your station during the poster session. I like to go through the abstract book and mark posters that I don't want to miss using post-it flags. It's very annoying when someone isn't at their poster at the appointed time. Grab a beverage beforehand so you can keep your voice. If you need a refill, send a friend.

Many poster sessions are done in shifts. Consider manning your poster the whole time. Some of the best conversations you'll have are at poster sessions, and they're centered on your work! I hired a postdoc on the basis of meeting her at a poster session. I've struck up collaborations on the basis of meeting people at their posters.

Look friendly and approachable. If people look even vaguely interested at your poster, try to hook them. If you're not enthusiastic about your work, how can you expect others to be? That said, some people prefer to read the poster themselves and don't want to be badgered the whole time.

Start with a clear statement of the main point. What question are you answering? What problem are you solving?

Then give a brief "visual outline" of your poster. Go through the main sections and point at them to orient the visitor.

Use any feedback from the brief tour to launch in to a more detailed description, often called a "spiel." Try to react to your visitor's level of sophistication and prompt them for interaction and questions.

The spiel should be short, but don't speed-talk. Pace yourself. Practice for your lab-mates and friends to get a good narrative. Your visitors will frequently interrupt before you get through everything, so be flexible and take their cues.

Connect to the individual. If you know them, relate your work to theirs if you can. If you meet

someone with very little background, ask some questions about what they know so you can better frame your work. Be prepared for experts in your field and people who might be entirely new (including undergrads at many meetings). You might practice a spiel for both extremes. Try presenting your poster to a friend who is not a scientist.

If friends and coworkers stop by, it's great to show them the latest and greatest, but don't end up gossiping with them all night instead of talking to new people.

If multiple people are at your poster, make sure to include them all. It can feel obnoxious to be standing at a poster and have the presenter only talk to one person and ignore everyone else. Note that this can be tricky as people walk up at different times. Sometimes you can catch up new people with a quick sentence "we're talking about X" that will bring them in while maintaining your flow. Mention that you can return to earlier material later if the new people are interested.

If you care about prizes, keep an eye out for potential poster judges. These are typically members of the scientific organizing committee, whose names are usually listed in the program. Sometimes they will reveal themselves, sometimes not. The "get straight to the point" directive is particularly important for them since they need to see many posters in a night. Also, keep your energy up! They are probably getting tired and will feed off your enthusiasm.

Keep a pen and notebook handy for useful suggestions, references, email addresses, and ideas. This will also come in handy for giving other people your contact information. With your contact info, always write a few words about the context and subject of the interaction. At the end of meetings, I often have a whole pocket of cards and paper scraps and no clear memory of what I was supposed to do with each one (send them something? talk about an idea? request a reprint?)

Don't get too dejected if you don't see a lot of traffic. There are lots of reasons for this that may not be a reflection on you and your project.

Right after your session, jot down some notes about how you can improve for next time.

Being a good poster visitor

Don't monopolize someone's time. If you want to have a deeper conversation, arrange to meet them over the next meal or break. This is true even if there's no obvious crowd. Some people are too polite to interrupt since they figure the person has already started their spiel.

Be methodical about viewing posters. There are so many! Make sure you don't miss the ones essential for your work, but also leave time for exploration.

Don't let people go off into space. If you already know the background, tell them so they can skip to the good stuff.

Ask first before taking photos.

Resources

Steve Block chapter in WICB career book, *Career Advice for Life Scientists* <http://www.ascb.org>

-> Presentations tab

PLoS 10 Simple Rules for a Good Poster Presentation

<http://www.ploscompbiol.org/article/info:doi/10.1371/journal.pcbi.0030102>

<http://betterposters.blogspot.com/>

<http://www.miller-mccune.com/science/science-posters-given-a-new-life-online-34066/>

<http://www.nmri.org/Skolr+Poster+Service>