

PREPARING YOURSELF FOR A POSTER PRESENTATION

So much time is spent preparing a polished and effective poster, but this is only one half of the presentation. You need to spend just as much time **preparing yourself**. Poster presentations are a chance for you to share your work with others and to promote your accomplishments – take full advantage of the opportunity!

SHARING YOUR STORY

“Tell me about your project.” This seemingly simple question – in one form or another – is a common way conversations begin at poster exhibitions, professional conferences, and networking events. If you’re not prepared, this question can be challenging.

Sharing information about your work is like telling a story. A well-crafted story provides a solid introduction highlighting the goals and intentions of your project, why the subject matter is of interest to you, and why the work is important to others and to your field. From there, move into a concise overview of how you went about (or are going about) your work, and finish with either a summary of your results or the next steps you plan to take to move your project forward.

As the storyteller it’s your job to clearly explain your work in a way that paints a picture for your audience and is appropriate for the level of technical knowledge your audience members may have. If you’re speaking to professionals within your field at a professional conference or poster presentation, the depth of technical information you choose to convey may be different than when you are sharing your work with individuals who have limited background knowledge relating to your work. The best approach is to avoid scientific jargon and technical terminology, presenting your work using everyday language. Those with technical knowledge and interest in your work can ask follow-up questions if they want more detailed information.

There is no set rule as to how long your story should be, though a general guideline is to keep your story around one minute, and no longer than two minutes. If you go longer than that you run the risk of losing the other person’s attention.

PRACTICING YOUR PRESENTATION

As important as it is to structure and plan how you present your story, it is equally important to practice it, as what is in your mind is often not what is actually communicated in the moment. Your story should sound natural, not scripted; each time you present your story it may be a little different, and that’s OK, as long as you are sharing key highlights and content. Avoid writing every word out and memorizing it; this will make your story sound unnatural, rehearsed, and overworked.

You want others to engage with your work; give them ample opportunities to ask questions on aspects of your project that most interest them. It’s impossible to anticipate all the questions you could be asked, but to become comfortable discussing your work and answering an unpredictable barrage of questions, practice with friends, advisors, and mentors. It’s especially helpful to practice answering questions with friends who are not familiar with your field of study; they will be able to tell you if you’re using overly technical language and how well you’re able to explain your work to a general audience.

One benefit of poster presentations is that you can incorporate the graphics on your poster into the discussion of your work. You also have the option to supplement your poster and the sharing of your work with other media, such as audio or visual files that you can access through a laptop or tablet. If you choose to do this, make sure your laptop or tablet is fully charged. Rarely will you have convenient access to an outlet.

Use your poster to illustrate key concepts with your audience, but always remember to keep your focus on the people in front of you. It can be tempting when you’re nervous to look only at your poster, but effective presenters maintain consistent eye contact with the people they’re speaking with. When practicing your story, have your poster behind you and get used to incorporating the images and graphics into your story so that this becomes natural and comfortable.

First impressions are made quickly; make sure that impression is a positive one, presenting you as a confident, well-spoken young professional who is passionate about the work you’re engaging in. Practice and preparation will help you accomplish this goal.

“Be creative with how you explain your project. For example, while I was presenting my poster I brought my laptop with me to play speech sound samples to better illustrate part of my study.”

- Julia Drouin '14

HANDOUTS & BUSINESS CARDS

Make it easy for interested people to follow up with you after the poster session. In addition to including your contact information on your poster, you can prepare a handout summarizing your work with key findings, links to more information, and providing your contact information. Once you finish crafting your poster, you can print out copies of it on standard 8½ x 11 inch paper and use these as your handouts. If you choose to do this, make sure the font is not too small or difficult to read, and that your name and contact information stands out.

Another way to provide contact information to interested parties is with business cards. As a student, you may think business cards aren't for you. They are! Business cards are an easy and professional way to exchange contact information with someone you encounter at a poster presentation or conference.

You may be wondering what you would put on a business card as a student. Keep it simple. Include your name, phone number, and email address. If you have a website where you are showcasing your creative work or your research, include the link! You can also include the link to your LinkedIn profile. Make sure to edit your LinkedIn profile to get a simpler URL, and check that your profile is up-to-date and includes information about your research or creative projects. You can also add information about your college or major affiliation, anticipated graduation date, or a professional headshot. See the example for ideas.



PROFESSIONAL APPEARANCE

When choosing what to wear to a poster presentation, think professional. In the majority of situations, casual attire is discouraged; even if those attending the poster session will be dressed casually, you should not be. Presenters should try to dress equivalent to or one notch above those who will be in attendance. Remember that you will be standing for an extended period of time; wear comfortable clothes and footwear.

General Guidelines

- **What to Wear:** Dress slacks or khaki pants (not cargo pants), button-up shirt, blouse, cardigan, sweater, suit jacket, blazer, sport coat, dress shoes, knee-length skirts and dresses, heels or dress flats.
- **What Not to Wear:** Jeans, shorts, short skirts, sweat pants, sweatshirts, t-shirts, sneakers, flip flops. In general, anything you would wear to hang out with your friends should not be worn to a professional event.

QUICK TIPS

What to Do

- Stand up straight, smile, and show your excitement for being there.
- Speak to your audience, not to your poster – face them and make eye contact. You can and should refer to your poster, pointing out key information that supports what you are saying, but make your audience your focus.
- Be cognizant of volume and background noise: speak loudly enough for your poster viewers to hear you, but not so loudly that you disturb those next to you.
- Speak clearly and at a conversational pace.
- Practice with others before the event so that you're prepared and comfortable.

What to Avoid

- Try not to use filler words, such as “um,” “like,” and “you know,” as these are distracting and make you sound less confident in the information you're presenting.
- Do not chew gum.
- Avoid using your cell phone or otherwise signaling you aren't eager to engage with the audience.
- Avoid overdramatic gestures or hand waving, as this may scare some people off.
- Avoid perfumes or colognes; those with fragrance sensitivities and allergies will appreciate it.
- Do not read from notes.

“While it might not seem important, first impressions (outfit included) do matter. Here is some advice I've put together based on my own conference experience:

Ask your peers for advice. If I had asked other people who had attended the conference before, I would have learned that 'business casual' in this context was not the same as in any other context.

Wear layers - you never know when the AC will start blasting. Bring a formal and a not-so-formal outfit.

Make sure to bring an umbrella. And Band-Aids.” - Kavita Sinha '18