

PRACTICAL ADVICE

Effective Poster Design

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Introduction

A poster is an abstract. The mistake most frequently made is to put too much information on your poster. Your poster should be an eye-catcher, containing a brief message, understood at a glance. It is claimed that you have about three seconds to catch the audience's attention. To achieve this "three second hit" there are some aspects that you can take into account when you set out to design a poster. This brief didactic paper addresses the issues that help you create an attractive and effective poster (BMA & BLATHE, 1973; Newble *et al.*, 1994).

Steps in Poster Design

- What is the "overall message" you intend to present?
- Define your audience: who do you want to reach? How expert are they? What can you assume to be common knowledge?
- What should the audience remember?
- Gather content: before editing, write down all aspects of your message that you can think of – the essential issues, arguments, items of evidence, explanations, conclusions.
- Think of a sequence that will hold the audience's attention and lead the eyes and mind to follow your argument from its start to its conclusion.
- Create sections: classify the information that you have gathered.

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- Make a heading for each section to stimulate the interest of the audience and introduce the following text.
- Make a statement for the information in each section: limit the information in each section to a caption and a statement, not exceeding five points.
- Find a focus, eliminate noise (edit, edit, edit!): try to explain your message to an 11-year-old.
- Put it together: only after all these steps have been taken you can make the poster. If your message can be read when you sketch it on one sheet of A4 (21 × 30 cm) or "legal-sized" (8.5 × 14 inch) paper, then the proportion is probably good.

Design of the Poster

Layout

Title and key message should catch the eye. If you design your poster on an A4 or "legal-sized" sheet, it can easily be enlarged to the optimal size (8 × original) without altering the proportions.

Colour

Use colour for a logo or a picture. Avoid coloured background. In the body of the poster, only use a support colour to group information that belongs together. Remember that 8% of the male population has impaired colour vision.

Text Size

If readable on an A4 or "legal-sized" sheet, the enlargement to a poster has adequate text size.

Style and Type

Use one or at most two fonts, preferably Arial or Times Roman. Only use **Bold**, CAPITALS or *Italic* when it absolutely cannot be avoided.

Paragraph Formatting

Justification is generally the optimal reading comfort, but avoid too long spaces between words.

Visuals

Only use pictures or other illustrations as an eye-catcher or when necessary to understand your message. Avoid unnecessary details on the picture.

Space

Leave about 50% of the surface of your poster as white space.

Criteria of a Good Poster

Clarity

Is the poster's key message immediately clear to the reader? Usually, people can remember a mean of seven items, plus or minus two. Be on the safe side, and list no more than five items. If you must address more than five items, group and categorise them into a tree-structure with headings and sub-headings.

Relevance

Every word on the poster should be relevant to the poster. Omit sidelines, a poster is an abstract.

Concision

Every word on the poster should be necessary to understand the poster's message. The information should be as limited as possible.

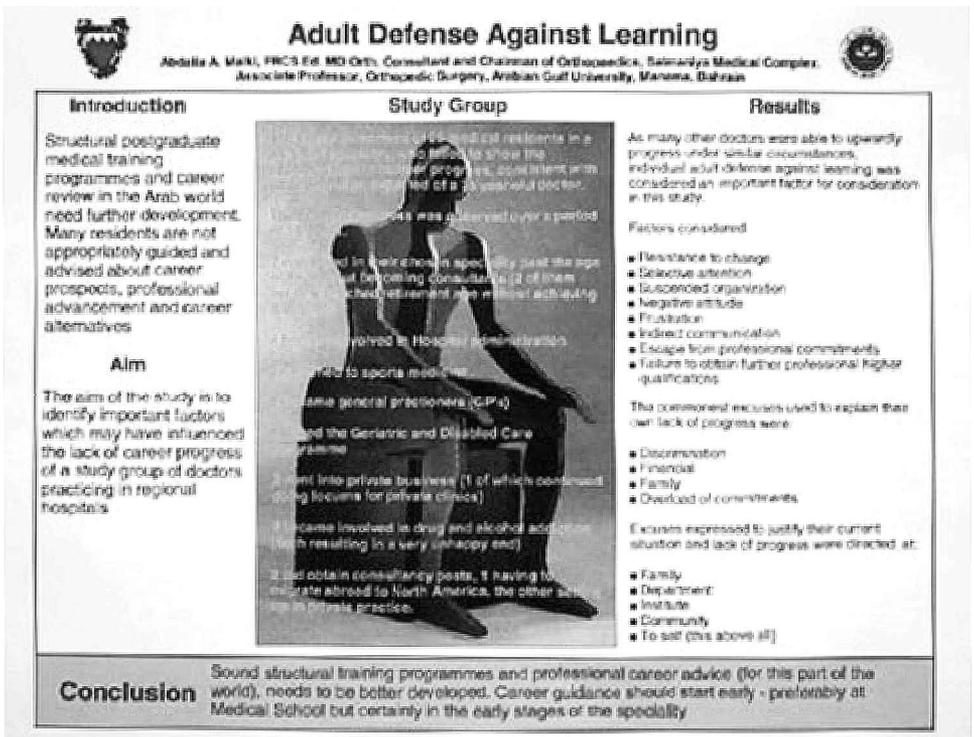


Figure 1. Simplicity and the use of categories in information on a poster by Abdalla M. Malki (Bahrain).

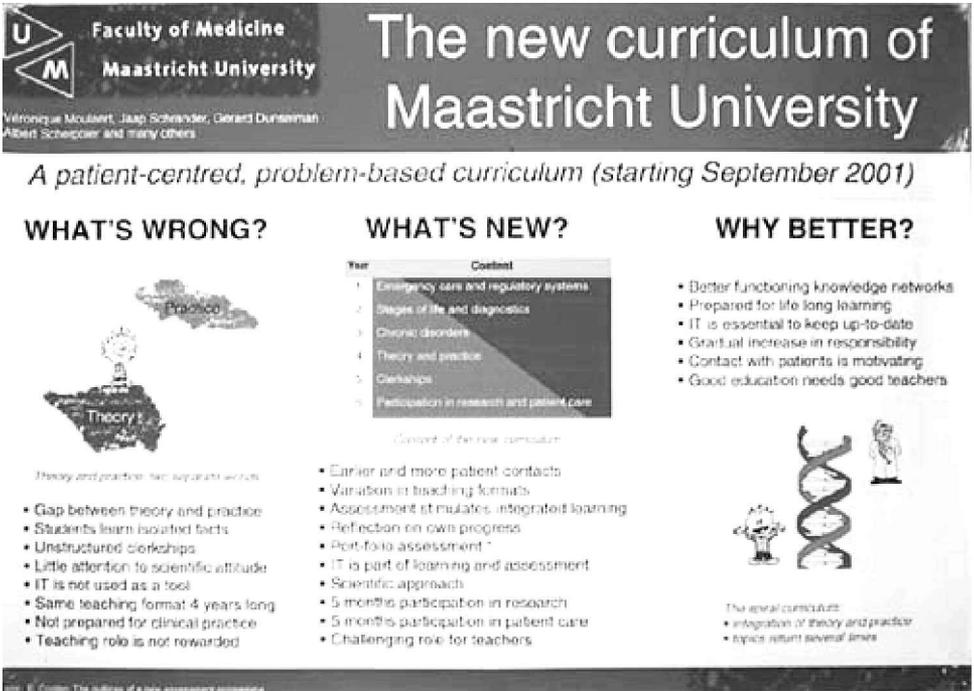


Figure 2. The use of headings and graphics in a poster by V. Moolaert *et al.* (Maastricht).

Appeal

The poster should look nice and inviting. It must attract attention and its appearance must not distract from the message. Simplicity is usually the best.

Readability

The lettering should be large enough, also for older viewers standing at a distance of 1–2 metres. It is tempting to reduce the font size to allow for more information on the poster, but this will discourage passers by.

Above two examples are given of outstanding posters, although reduction of the size as well as reproduction in black and white does reduce the impact. Figure 1 shows the poster that won the Best Poster Award at the International Network Conference in Bahrain: A.M. Malki (Bahrain); Adult Defence Against Learning. This poster was selected because of its appeal, clarity and simplicity, by which the message quickly becomes clear. It also shows that the guidelines mentioned above do not always apply: here the lettering over a picture background did not hamper the readability.

Figure 2 shows a poster that was selected for an additional award at the same occasion: V. Moolaert, J. Schrandt, G. Dunselman, A. Scherpier "and many others". The new curriculum of Maastricht University. This poster is an excellent example of how information can be structured with the use of headings, and of the use of graphics.

References

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Relevant Websites

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