Tips for a successful poster presentation

A common goal of many pharmacy residents is to present their research in a poster at a regional or national meeting. Once the poster abstract has been written and accepted for presentation at a meeting, much work is left to be done to create a successful poster presentation.

**Getting started.** Poster format and appearance widely vary according to the presenter’s personal taste and institutional preference. Even though the look of each poster is different, most presenters create their posters with PowerPoint (Microsoft Corp., Redmond, WA). Other programs that may be used to create posters include Illustrator, Photoshop, and InDesign (Adobe Systems, San Jose, CA); Microsoft Publisher (Microsoft Corp.); and PosterGenius (SciGen Technologies, Chicago, IL), among others. Before you begin to work on your poster, review any specific directions provided by the organization to which you are presenting to ensure that your poster meets the requirements, such as size restrictions and required sections. For an example, see the poster presenter handbook for the American Society of Health-System Pharmacists.1 Ask a colleague or supervisor if your university or health system has a poster template or institutional graphic that is preferred. Using a preformatted template will save you the time and any aggravation involved with creating your own.

Next, include your assigned poster or abstract number in the top corner of the poster. This serves two purposes. First, while a number is provided on the poster board, it is often covered by the corner or edge of the poster. By including the number on your poster, you allow session attendees to easily find your poster. Second, the presence of the poster number on the poster reminds you of your assigned position when finding your board (without requiring you to check your book, bag, or confirmation letter).

**Hit the highlights.** At this point, your poster template is ready. Similar to a manuscript, the sections on a poster typically include background, objectives, methods, results, discussion, and a conclusion. You may find it helpful to expand some or all of these sections from your abstract for your poster. Some professional meetings also require additional items, such as a copy of your previously accepted abstract or a disclosure statement. References typically are not required (or even suggested).

Because you are likely proud of your research, you may feel compelled to display everything you have learned throughout the course of your research. Be cautious not to overwhelm your poster with extraneous information. If your poster looks too crowded, revise it to hit the highlights of your research project, removing secondary or tertiary objectives. You can be prepared to verbally expand on your additional results when answering questions. Many presenters bring a folder to their poster sessions with their complete results for such situations.

**Formatting.** Now that your poster template has been filled with your data, it is important to format the data in a way that will enhance and highlight your research. First, the sections of your poster should flow logically from left to right and top to bottom, as you would read a book. This helps attendees easily skim through information and identify areas that require clarification. Second, limit the number of full sentences on your poster—some empty space is OK! Sections that commonly use full sentences or paragraphs include
the background and discussion. Most or all other sections can easily be formatted into bullet points or phrases.

With the high volume of posters to view, session attendees tend to avoid posters that require them to read lengthy posters or stand in your personal space. Be sure to choose a font type and size that can be read from a distance of several feet away. As a general rule, heading sections should be set in bold, 36-point type; text should be set no smaller than 24-point type. Observing simple formatting rules, such as consistency in font, color, box size, and column width, will enhance the quality of your poster. Serif fonts such as Palatino and Times New Roman can be easier to read. In addition, charts and graphics are excellent vehicles to display results. For the highest-quality image, picture or graphic resolution should be 150–300 dpi. Some programs, like the Adobe options and PosterGenius, can be used to create graphics or enhance those you already have. Free online programs that can be used to create graphics include Gliffy, Lovely Charts, TeeChart Office, Creately, and Graphity, among others. For more free options, we recommend checking Freebyte’s Guide to Free Graphics Software. Be careful not to duplicate information in two places (both text and graphic). If your graphics are carefully chosen, their presence will draw in viewers and tell the story of your research. Charts and graphics will relay information faster than text alone and may increase your poster’s number of views.

Finally, when creating your poster, be sure to use the Ruler and Gridlines functions found in Microsoft PowerPoint and other programs. This will ensure that the different sections of your poster are aligned and evenly arranged, helping you create a neat, professional, and organized poster.

**Revisions.** Once you have a solid draft poster that is appropriately formatted, it is important to review it for accuracy, completeness, and aesthetics. Your research advisor or others involved in the project will be able to provide this input. In addition, every author listed on the poster should be given an opportunity to review the poster before sending it to the printer.

As a second review option, consult other students, residents, or pharmacists at your institution who are presenting a poster at the meeting. Offer to review their posters if they will do the same for you, especially people who have not participated in your research. A reviewer who is not an expert on the topic will help determine if your terminology, graphics, and conclusions are easily understood.

**Preparing for the meeting.** At this point, your poster has been reviewed and is ready for printing. Most presenters print posters locally and bring them to the meeting. Poster-carrying tubes will hold several posters and are available at many office supply stores. Offer to combine posters in one tube and share transporting duties with colleagues. Keeping the poster rolled in a tube for transport will ensure that it stays free of wrinkles in the event that you have the opportunity to present your findings later as an “encore.” Be sure not to leave the tube on the plane or in the cab!

If you would rather not be responsible for transporting your poster, a couple of options are available. Some presenters choose to ship their posters to the meeting. Keep in mind, though, that shipping your poster is not without risk. You may end up with a damaged poster or no poster if it gets lost on the way to the meeting. This may also be a more-costly method than bringing the poster with you. Alternatively, many professional meetings offer a poster-printing service that will have your posters ready and available for pickup when you arrive. This is generally more expensive than the press or printing service used by most universities. However, if you are responsible for finding your own printer and method of transport, the costs may be about equal. Finally, a new option is to print your poster on fabric. Fabric posters can be folded, transported in your luggage, and ironed before presentation. These are generally more expensive than paper posters but may be more durable for encore presentations.

When preparing to present a poster, it is a good idea to have a few extra supplies on hand. Be sure to review the meeting’s poster instructions, which will tell you when you need to hang your poster and your designated presentation time. The meeting may provide pushpins, but we recommend that you bring extra in the event that none are provided. Although your abstract will be published in print or online, it is still advisable to bring printed paper handouts or copies of your poster for distribution. If you are technologically savvy, you can create a QR code (a type of matrix barcode) for your poster so that attendees can quickly find the information included, share your poster with meeting attendees via Bump technology, or provide the link to a static website where visitors can view your poster and leave comments. Finally, since you may have visitors who are specifically interested in your research, it is a good idea to bring extra business cards for networking and distribution. This is especially important if you have not included your contact information on your printed poster handout.

Before leaving for the meeting or poster session, it is important to practice your presentation as you would with any oral presentation. First, practice summarizing your research in a maximum of one or two lines. This should be a very general overview that gives your audience an idea of your research without overwhelming people with details (e.g., “We examined the frequency of bleeding associated with the newer anticoagulants after surgery.”). The overview provides an introduction to your research, an opening line, and a response to visitors who ask you to tell them about your research. Second, be prepared to expand on this introduction with a short summary of your methods and results for those who are interested or ask further questions. This concise summary will allow you to provide more details about your project and point out results or graphics on your poster. Finally, practice your presentation with your research advisor, mentor, or coworkers and have them ask questions. This will give you an idea of questions that may arise and allow you to practice answering questions in a way that will be understood by your audience.

**At the poster session.** After arriving at the session, the first thing you should do is place your poster on the board. This is a great time to get to know others in attendance by offering to help them hang their posters straight if they will do the
same for you. Some will also hang handouts or business cards on the board to facilitate easy distribution.

During the poster session, you will generally encounter three types of poster visitors. The first type is the person walking by all posters, browsing to see which posters are of interest. Politely greet these visitors and let them read what they want of your poster. They may ask you specific questions about the research, so be prepared for a short discussion. The second type of poster visitor is someone who planned to come see your poster after reviewing the different titles and abstracts. This person will likely open up discussion by asking you to briefly describe your research. This person will then ask additional follow-up questions depending on what you say. The third type of poster visitor is someone who knows you and wants to say hello and congratulate you on your poster. While it is important to speak to the third type of person and network briefly, it is also important that you do not allow social interactions to prevent those interested from asking questions about your poster or project.

Your goal at the poster session should be to look attentive and welcoming of questions without hovering over those who visit your poster. To accomplish this, we suggest standing to one side of the poster and angle slightly in toward the poster to avoid blocking the center of the poster. In addition, make eye contact with those who visit your poster and offer to answer any questions they may have. If there is a shortage of people visiting your poster, making eye contact and greeting those who are passing your poster may encourage questions or conversation, which in turn often draws in others.

Presenting research at a professional society meeting is a worthwhile endeavor. With careful planning, you can make sure your poster looks as organized as the research behind it.


Katie S. McClendon, Pharm.D., BCPS, Clinical Assistant Professor of Pharmacy Practice
Kayla R. Stover, Pharm.D., BCPS-ID, Assistant Professor of Pharmacy Practice
kstover@umc.edu

University of Mississippi School of Pharmacy
Jackson, MS

The authors have declared no potential conflicts of interest.

DOI 10.2146/ajhp130116