

## How to Give a Poster Presentation

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([http://www.lel.ed.ac.uk/~mdowman/mike\\_dowman\\_how\\_to\\_give\\_a\\_poster\\_presentation.html](http://www.lel.ed.ac.uk/~mdowman/mike_dowman_how_to_give_a_poster_presentation.html))

OK – let's face it – you really wish you were giving a talk, but you've been postered. So, let's try and make the best of it. I know it's going to be an up-hill struggle to convince you, but I'm going to tell you how you can get a lot more out of giving your poster than you ever would have from a talk.

My first tip is **do not under any circumstances** do what everyone else does. 99.9% of researchers couldn't give a poster presentation to save their lives (in my not-so-humble opinion). At the average poster session you will see a lot of essays stuck up on boards that absolutely no one wants to read. Even worse, if you go near one of them, you're likely to be ambushed by someone desperate to explain it to you – regardless of who you are and whether you care about their work.

So, now a question for you: What are conferences for? OK – hopefully you answered (1) for getting feedback on my work, (2) for making connections with people in my field, and (3) for letting other people know about the exciting new findings my work has produced. And I say you can achieve all three much better with a poster than with a talk – but only if you go about it in the right way.

The first thing to remember is that it's a poster *presentation*. Think presentation first and poster second. Just sticking your poster up and standing next to it ready to answer questions isn't going to achieve anything. The point is to talk to people.

Beforehand you need to work out how to explain your research in four or five sentences: what it's about; why it matters; what you did; what the results are; what the take-home message is. Then, when people come near your poster, you use this prepared spiel to let them know what you're about – and while you're doing this you pay close attention to them to see if they are listening. Let's face it, while you probably understand why what you're doing is really important, most of the other conference attendees will be deeply engaged with their own research agenda. So if your research doesn't seem to be exciting them, stop talking. They'll soon move on – leaving you free to propagandize your research to someone more receptive.

Remember that you only have a limited time to get your message across – so you don't want to waste any of it talking to people who don't matter. Now, the important people aren't the famous professors – they're the people who are most knowledgeable about and interested in your field, even if they're junior lecturers or beginning research students. These are the people most likely to make useful comments, ask interesting questions, and to cite you in their own work. And don't just focus on those researchers you think are going to like your approach: feedback from people who hate your work can be just as useful as that from people who love it. It's the bland comments from those who neither know nor care that are the least likely to be helpful.

So, once you've found the right person, you need to encourage them to think about your work in a bit more depth, hopefully resulting in some useful feedback. The best way to do this is to ask questions. (Yes – there's no rule that says you have to leave it up to the audience to ask the questions.) Not only will this appeal to their vanity (so helping to foster goodwill towards yourself), it also puts you in the driving seat – giving you a chance to focus their attention on what you think are the important issues.

It's best to think up some suitable questions beforehand, perhaps along the lines of 'Do you think this is the best way to measure this?', 'How would you have done it?', and 'Do you think the results of this study could make a useful contribution to your own work?' And remember to put your heart and soul into it – if you show that you're really passionate about your research, and that you really care about what you're doing, you're way more likely to grab someone's attention and make a lasting impression.

Also, don't think you need to wait until the poster session to start promoting your work. Tell people you've got a poster, and let them know what it is. (If you're giving a talk as well, be sure to include a shameless plug for your poster.) Go up to people who work in your area and say you'd really like to get their feedback on your poster. If they seem interested, you can even tell them about your research there and then – there's no need to wait for the official time and place. And in the poster session itself, there's nothing to stop you going up to relevant people and asking them questions about your work – often a handy device for getting them to come over and take a look at your poster. You might even want to mention that your study is inspired in part by their research – even if this isn't actually true, they'll probably be so flattered that they won't notice.

In some conferences, you're able to put your poster up well before the official poster session, often in a foyer or refreshment area. If this is the case, keep a close eye on your poster – and when you see someone taking a look, go and ask them how they like it. With this kind of set-up, you can potentially be doing your poster all day long – guaranteeing far more feedback than you'd get in any end-of-talk question session.

Now you've got my advice about how to present your poster, I really ought to say something about the one aspect of poster presentations that I've largely ignored up to this point: the poster itself. Here I recommend a less is more approach. I touched on this before, but I'll repeat it just to make sure you get the message: Do not under any circumstances put big chunks of text on your poster. Don't even put full sentences. Just put titles, bullet points, pictures, diagrams and graphs. If people wanted to read, they could have stayed at home and downloaded a paper from your web page. The point of conferences is that they allow for two-way interaction: discussion, comments, criticism and praise.

So, make your poster an outline of your research – a visual aid to help guide you and your audience through your work – and an aide-mémoire for key facts and figures – just like the Power Point slides in regular presentations. [Here](#) and [here](#) are a couple of examples of my own posters that follow these rules. Don't think that the poster has to explain your research by itself – it's only one part of the poster presentation, and not the most important bit at that.

As a reference, and to give out to anyone who's really interested, you might want to have a few copies of a written version of your work handy, or maybe a handout summarizing the key points. With a bit of luck, the people you give them to just might get them read on the flight home.

So, have I convinced you that it's possible to get a lot more out of a poster than a talk? In a talk you get to explain your work to many people at once – but they don't usually really engage with it very deeply. And you only get a tiny bit of feedback via a few questions at the end. With a poster, you can have multiple face-to-face discussions with the people who really care about what you are doing – which is usually a whole lot more informative, stimulating and memorable. A poster doesn't have to be a consolation prize!