

'Fumes from the Spleen' On Preparing a Scientific Poster

I recently returned from an epidemiology meeting that included the display of research posters. I noticed a disquieting trend. Several of these posters approached lucidity, with presentations that were simple and cogent. For some, it was possible within a brief time of relaxed inspection to understand both the question being addressed and the authors' result.

My friends, we must band together to stamp out this scourge.

What gives science its prestige – indeed, its majesty – is its tantalizing mystery. Can we afford to make our work so transparently informative that any casual passerby can grasp it? I trust that you will see what is at stake here, and how serious the challenge.

As a service to the epidemiological community, I am therefore providing guidelines for making posters suitably opaque and inscrutable. These ten recommendations are essential in achieving that aura of mystery on which all important science depends.

1. **'Regard your poster as a condensed scientific paper.'** This is the golden rule of posters. A research paper provides authoritative documentation of your study, and your poster must do the same. You may protest that it is 'too hard' to cram everything into a poster – all I can say is that you must be strong. Your audience will have no respect for your work unless your poster can convey the full details of how the study was conducted.
2. **'Reward the reader with a richly nuanced text.'** Your poster should reveal (modestly, of course) the complexity of your thinking, the subtlety of your analysis, and the clever ways in which you have anticipated every possible criticism.
3. **'Do not constrain your poster to one central idea.'** If your poster is to be taken seriously, it should involve several themes. All the better if your themes are only loosely related. How else can readers appreciate your imagination and breadth?
4. **'Make the title richly informative.'** Include the study design, time-frame, geographic region, and perhaps throw in the sample size for good measure. If your title contains only the scientific question, you run a risk that readers will quickly grasp your purpose, and drift on to the next poster.
5. **'All science begins with an abstract.'** There is a modern tendency among some researchers to omit an abstract in posters, with the misbegotten notion that the poster itself functions as the abstract. Where is our respect for scientific formality??
6. **'Use long sentences.'** English prose is one of the great legacies of our culture, and it deserves to be showcased. I was especially dismayed by the occasional use of 'bullets' – sure evidence of the corrosive influence of PowerPoint. Would Shakespeare have written in 'bullets'?
7. **'Use no font larger than 18 point.'** Large fonts, frankly, are vulgar – not to mention the obvious fact that they limit the number of words that can be placed on the poster.
8. **'Large tables add depth.'** Any table less than six rows and four columns invite the suspicion that you are a simple-minded person with no respect for the fine points of your data. Also, make sure your tables include several footnotes. (If the footnotes are unreadably small, no problem – they are there simply to convey the impression of scholarly enterprise.)
9. **'Just say NO to figures!'** Figures take away valuable space from your prose. (A useful rule-of-thumb is that a figure eliminates up to a thousand words.) Much better to rely on your skill with words than to resort to cheap illustrations.
10. **'Hide essential information in unexpected places.'** It is more entertaining for your readers if they must explore the odd corners of your poster in order to assemble the full picture. This creates camaraderie amongst the group viewing your poster, and encourages jovial conversation among them as they share in the discovery of bits that make the big picture.

These guidelines may seem simple enough, but they are the distilled wisdom of years of observation. Let me add one final caution: there are no short-cuts here. Any one of these ten guidelines may appear unimportant in itself, but each is essential. Without these, you run the risk – dare I say, the shame – of having your work stripped of its mystery, and its contents laid bare for all to grasp.

The Sophist