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Posters

Poster Sessions

Big room full of easels or bulletin boards. You bring your poster; they provide stuff to hang it up with (but check the conference announcement to make sure).

A session lasts maybe three hours. Owners of odd-numbered posters circulate for an hour and a half while the even numbers stand by their posters and explain; then vice versa.

What you need

Your poster.

A handout (usually in the same words as the poster, but reformatted to fit on three or four letter-sized pages). Bring more copies than modesty would urge.

The paper that the poster is about (if you have one). Again, bring lots of copies.

Business cards, and something to put other people's business cards in. People will be constantly offering you theirs; it's embarrassing if you don't have any to give them.

Stuff! For instance, a tape recorder or laptop computer with sounds to listen to. See note on Stuff below.

Pen and paper. (People will make suggestions; you want to be able to write them down.)

Water. (You will be talking almost continuously for two or three hours.)

The purpose of your poster

Actually there are three. They are

ONE. To illustrate your explanation to the hearer when you are there.

TWO. To explain your work to the reader when you are *not* there.

THREE. To make people want to read your paper.

Poster design in theory

CLARITY. CLARITY. CLARITY.

Linguistics is complicated stuff. If you can communicate *one point* well in the time you'll have, you're doing better than a lot of people. Decide what your most important point is, then design the poster to make *just that point*.

There may be all sorts of other cool stuff you're dying to show people. Fine. Put that in your paper. If they liked your poster, they'll read the paper.

Also, your poster should look attractive and professional.

Attractive: Literally, it should attract people. They should be able to see, even from a distance, what the poster is about and why someone would want to read it (choose your title well!). They should see at once that it will be easy to read, too.

Professional: It should be neat, and not look like it was thrown together last night.

Poster design in practice

Size

The conference organizers will tell you how much space you have. Use all of it. Enlarge the text and figures so that they fill up the whole area allotted to you. The smallest letters need to be at least as big as your fingernails, so that people can read it from a distance. Section headings should be even bigger, to catch the eye of passersby.

Layout

Big title at the top. Make it visible from a great distance. Choose your title well! It's the biggest thing on the whole poster.

Don't forget to include your *email address!* (On the poster, on the handout, and on the paper.)

Short abstract at the beginning.

Divide into sections. Each section should start with an informative title (a sort of four-word abstract of the section) in large type.

Use color if you have the technology, but be restrained about it. If you do decorate, keep the decoration away from the information.

Style

"Write like you're writing for *USA Today*." —Helen C. Plotkin, my boss back when I was a tech writer.

"Minimize non-data ink." —Arthur Tufte, author of *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information*.

Use few words, and make them short.

Don't use words if you can use a picture.

Don't use a complicated picture if you can use a simple one. In an OT tableau, for instance, don't show any constraint or candidate that is not *immediately* relevant to your argument.

Don't try to bulletproof your poster. Sure, someone is bound to ask, "But what about [some candidate that isn't in one of the tableaus on your poster]?" Your response to this is: "That's in the full tableau on page 22 of my paper. Here, let me give you a copy. I'd love to get your comments — see, that's my email address right there."

Use indentation, bullets, fonts, color, etc. to show the reader the flow of your reasoning. White space is never wasted.

Announce what you're going to do before you do it. If you have four arguments to support a particular point, do this:

Blah blah blah blah blah, because

1. Whatever.
2. Yadda yadda.
3. Rhubarb rhubarb.
4. Nyaa nyaa nyaa.

Rather than:

Whatever. Yadda yadda, and rhubarb rhubarb. Nyaa nyaa nyaa. Therefore, blah blah blah blah blah.

If two things are going to be compared, put them next to each other—even if it means repeating one of them from a previous part of the poster.

Content

Don't tell them anything they don't need to know. This includes

- Anything irrelevant to making the main point (digressions)
- Anything they already know

Making a poster

(Here's what I do. It works okay. There are plenty of other good methods, too.)

The largest size of paper you can get out of a Kinko's photocopier is, I think, 11" by 17" — the same proportions as letter-sized, but twice as big. Divide the poster space into 11x17 panels (landscape orientation). These are the basic units of your poster.

Each panel should make a single *small* point. It should have a summarizing title in big type at or across the top, and a panel number to tell people what order the panels are read in.

The sequence of panels should be from top to bottom in each column, so that readers don't have to keep walking back and forth. When you hang the poster, leave space between the columns to remind people that it is to be read top to bottom.

TITLE Author <i>email</i>	Rhubarb 3	Argle bargle 7	Bavardage 11
Abstract	Blither 4	Yadda yadda 8	Persiflage 12
Blah 1	Wosname 5	9	Conclusions 13
Whatever 2	6	Lah-di-dah 10	References

Decide what you want in each panel. Then set your word processor to landscape orientation, letter-sized paper, and compose. (Notice how the sections on “Wosname” and “Yadda yadda” can be made to take up two panels by simply not putting a title on the second panel.)

Print them out, take them to Kinko's, and enlarge them. Now you have a poster! Make lots of copies of the letter-sized original. Now you have a handout! (Thought problem: If you copy them onto transparencies, what do you have?)

For the title across the top, you can just keep enlarging and enlarging until each one of your top row of panels has only a few letters on it, overlapping with those on its neighbors.

A Note on Stuff



A cassette, a videotape, a laptop with sound files, anything that gets people fiddling around. If you recorded speakers, bring a tape or a laptop with sound files. If you did an experiment, bring your stimuli. If you can set up a laptop to re-create the experiment, do so. This is both good science and good advertising:

Good science

People have a better idea of what exactly you did. This puts them in a better position to understand the basis for your claims (and saves you a lot of bother describing your setup).

They can hear for themselves and make up their own minds about your interpretation of the data (does it *sound* like downstep?, etc.). They may point out something you missed.

Good advertising

Demonstrations draw a crowd.

- Everybody likes toys, and if they can see you have one, they will head straight for your poster.
- People have to hang around your poster waiting for their turn with the headphones.
- While they are waiting, they will pass the time by actually reading your poster or talking with you.
- The knot of people hanging around will automatically attract *more* people!

Your claim is both more understandable and more believable if you can give a *vivid experience* of the phenomenon instead of just telling about it. (This also makes your claim, and your poster, and you, more memorable.)

Conversely, if you aren't willing to play your stimuli or speech data, people are bound to wonder what you are hiding. (This is especially true if you are using synthetic speech!) Stick your head boldly in the shark's mouth -- they'll remember!

Obviously, this is easiest to do if your poster is about new lab or field data, i.e., if you are doing phonetics or psycholinguistics. But it applies just as much to phonology. I mean, most people in phonology have never actually *heard* even the most famous of examples (Axininca Campa? Yawelmani Yokuts?). They would be surprised and delighted to find that someone had gone to the trouble of getting a native speaker to record the Polish devoicing examples on their poster, and they would spend time hanging out around that poster listening (or waiting to listen), and they would remember it, and remember its author.

You may not even have to bring your own machine. Conference organizers often have a lot of audiovisual equipment to loan out—and believe me, it's not like everybody's trying to get ahold of it. Check with them well in advance and arrange for whatever you need. Then check again a week before the conference, just to make sure and to give yourself time to make other arrangements if they've screwed it up.