

## Tips for Designing Technical Communication Program Posters

At the 2005 CPTSC conference in Lubbock, about thirty participants spent an hour trying to define the criteria for an excellent technical communication program poster (as distinguished from a scientific poster).

### Why CPTSC posters aren't science posters

The scientific method usually governs the structure of a scientific or engineering poster (science poster areas, like report divisions, tend to focus on purpose, method, results, and conclusions). **However, the conference theme and our concern with programmatic issues at CPTSC sessions justify a greater diversity of structure and content.** We agreed that posters are especially effective in showing

- Program structure or schematics of how a program or department is organized
- Processes, especially sequences (such as curricula) or syllabi
- Individuals engaged in instruction, learning, or presenting
- Data in relation to specific questions or issues
- Examples of communication products

At some other conference, technical communication posters might deal primarily with research, but that is not the main focus for CPTSC.

### CPTSC Poster Viewers' Needs

As one might expect with an organization concerned with rhetoric, most of the comments focused on issues of serving viewers' needs.

When a CPTSC participants visits the posters, he or she usually needs to

- Determine quickly how to allocate his or her time
- Identify the importance or relevance of the issue presented
- Get an overall sense of how the poster is organized
- Read content quickly and easily
- Read from a distance of 4 to 6 feet
- Ask the presenter for details relevant to the viewer's own school

### How Posters Can Respond to Viewers' Needs

**1. Give them a "gist."** Some people want to visit the posters between sessions or during breaks, and they need a "gist," an easily identified place on the poster that says what the poster is about, why it matters, and what it covers. A gist is not necessarily an abstract. This may be a central diagram with a heading or design features that indicate this is the central point. The poster design should make the gist easy to find. Putting it in the upper

left hand corner in somewhat bigger point size may be a help. It need not be in one paragraph (as an abstract in a journal article would be).

**2. Ensure legibility with adequate contrast between text and background.** A textured background or a colored background similar to the font color can make text hard to read. Black text on dark red, blue, or green can be hard to read.

**3. Ensure legibility with adequate point sizes and easy-to-read fonts,** used in a hierarchy that expresses important ideas in big point sizes, subordinate material in smaller sizes, and equally important ideas in the same point size and type treatment. **A excerpt from a guide from the Cain Project in Engineering on point size and type treatments is shown at the end of this set of tips.**

**4. Choose visuals familiar to your audience or label carefully.** If the audience doesn't recognize the type of graph you're using (say, a log graph or a cross-section of a tissue), be sure to label it and say what they should notice. Visitors turn away from confusing images, thinking they're not relevant to their concerns or are too difficult to grasp.

**5. Organize your topics logically and indicate the flow of the argument or information with graphic cues.** You can use arrows, numbers, or images to organize the space so the viewer knows where to start, where to go next, and what he or she will find in each part. Headings that line up on the left are easier to "find" than centered headings.

Write a summary or gist, and then expand that with visuals and limited text. Don't try to reduce the paper. A walk-by audience doesn't want to read twenty pages crammed into a large space. They will ask for more detail if they want it.

**6. Put your text on a diet.** Shrink fat text to lean text, as in this example:

#### **Original**

The ideal anesthetic should quickly make the patient unconscious but allow a quick return to consciousness, have few side effects, and be safe to handle.

#### **Revised**

**Ideal anesthetics**

- Quick sedation
- Quick recovery
- Few side effects
- Safe to handle

Look at it from the perspective of a reader. Have this sense of panic. Too much to read dissuades the reader. Reduce the amount of text and use meaningful visuals. Think about how long it would take you to read the amount of text you've put on your poster. You KNOW it's important; the audience may be daunted by too much text.

**7. At present, no audio, video, or computer displays should be attempted.** Although multimedia posters may be ahead in the future, space at CPTSC sessions is limited, and

audio from video or music competes with the presenter's voice and with the voices of other presenters and visitors who are trying to communicate with one another.

**8. Use your seminar at home like a focus or user group** to find design's strengths and weaknesses. What did they like? What did they ask more about? What confused them?

**9. Make sure your poster can stand alone.** These posters are supposed to be viewed through like the day. (see checklist at <http://www.owl.net/ricc.edu/~cainproj/checkposter.html>).

**10. Practice different versions of your poster talk:** the 30-second, four-sentence summary, the one-minute summary plus a "tour" of the major headings; the three-minute explanation of the poster. You can organize the talk around what you imagine will be the viewers' probable questions.

When you practice your talk, practice gesturing toward the poster areas without losing eye contact with the audience (shades of Vanna White) until you are comfortable with the fact that the poster behind you or at your side is not organized left to right as it would be in your mind's eye.

**11. Explain your visuals.** Allow viewers to take a few seconds to look at diagrams or figures and talk them through the visual. Don't say, "These are the results of the student surveys" and assume that everyone knows what the figure means.

**12. Be sure to put contact information and acknowledgements on your poster** (especially if your project was funded by a foundation or agency or dean). People who view the poster during a break may want to get in touch with you to ask questions or propose future collaborations.

*Here is a guide from the Cain Project in Engineering and Professional Communication web site on poster design ( <http://www.owl.net.rice.edu/~cainproj/> ) about font style and size if your viewers are likely to be three to five feet from your poster:*

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**About Fonts:** Serif fonts have "tails" at the base and tips of letters and have line widths that thin out on curves. They are harder to read from a distance, especially if the contrast between the letter and the background is poor. Sans Serif fonts have consistent or uniform line widths or line widths that vary only a little. They have "no tails" (sans serif means "without a tail" in French).

Title (6-8 words) **Sans**

(Arial bold) **90 - 120**  
pts or more

Headings (3 words)

**Sans** (Arial) **36 - 48** pt

Text **Serif** (Times ) **30 - 36** pt.

**Sans Serif** (Arial) **30 - 36** pt.

In general, the uniform shaft width of sans serif fonts (such as Arial, Helvetica, and Verdana) are easier to read at small point sizes. These fonts do not "thin out" at the curves and are recognizable at a greater distance than Times New Roman, which you are reading now.