

Polishing your poster props

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Everybody loves a good poster. You undoubtedly encounter dozens of them in the course of a day, the vast majority being advertisements of one sort or another. Whether the content is toothpaste, clothing, or the latest video game, the goal remains the same. Good ones are entertaining, better ones are informative, while the best ones stop you in your tracks and make you think.

You may think of a research poster as having loftier ambitions, and certainly it must subscribe to a higher standard of technical quality and accuracy. Nevertheless, if you are composing a poster at all, you must ask some of the same questions as any corporate advertising executive: Who is my audience? Why am I speaking to them? What do they need to know? What do I want them to do?

As a starting point, then, remember that the person reading your poster may know nothing about your work. And even if should they know all about your work, you should never assume as much. Everyone appreciates a version of events that is broadly accessible, even when they are capable of diving into your reach from a highly advanced level. More importantly, it will help you put the nature of your work in perspective. Rather than simply choosing the point where you began in your research, consider what came before that point — why you got into the field, what happened along the way, why it is meaningful. In other words, tell a story.

You probably did not think of yourself as a storyteller when you first started studying engineering. But your academic career and the course of your research do make a coherent story. There will be specific reasons why you are doing what you are doing, even if it happens to be something as mundane as “this is a problem I had in a place where I was working one summer, and it continues to interest me”. Contrary to what you might think, this is not frivolous information. The problem you are addressing might be a familiar one that has remained unsolved for some time, in which case a reader will suddenly be very interested in your approach. Similarly, even if a reader knows nothing about the problem, it is equally interesting to begin by indicating that it is something you have encountered in practice, rather than as a purely theoretical exercise. In either case, you have usefully made your poster more “real” to an outside observer, providing an honest, genuine starting point for what is to come.

Thinking of your poster as a story “arc” — with a distinct beginning, middle, and ending — will also help you frame the content within the limited confines of a single large page. This limitation is the greatest challenge facing anyone who has a message to communicate. One of the ironies of communication is that you would probably find it much easier to put together a poster if you had a 10 metre by 10 metre blank space in front of you. Plenty of paper means plenty of room to wander, and you could get every last detail into your account. The reality, though, is that you never have enough room. There is always less blank space than you would like. And more importantly, your audience always has less time than you would like. You must therefore find a

way to make them invest some of their time with you, and do so by offering only a limited view of your work. You must invariably leave out many details about what you have done, while retaining the essence of your story. It is not an impossible exercise, nor is it an easy one. But then, you did not start studying engineering because it was easy, did you?

The good news is that once you have completed this exercise, you can recycle the results. All that extra effort pays off handsomely. Now you have a tidy, manageable piece of text that offers all the convenience of a business card. For everything from seminars to informal conversations where you follow up by e-mail, whenever someone asks you for background material, you can have this highly portable and accessible story ready to share. You can satisfy people's curiosity immediately. It becomes a way of helping people quickly understand what you are trying to do, perhaps with the goal of encouraging them to take a longer, closer look at your work.

Above all, this is your writing, so you can re-use it as often as you like. You may have been warned about plagiarising other people's writing, but it is impossible to plagiarise yourself. The worst that can happen is that people who meet you often could think you are repeating yourself; point out to them that your consistency is a strength!

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