Guidelines for Making Great Academic Posters

General Guidance

At a poster conference, you – the presenter – are the main attraction, since you know the details about your research. Your poster is a visual aid that allows passers-by to gather a general idea about your work, so they can decide if they would like to invest time in further discussion with you. In this sense, the posters should only focus on the main points of your research, and support these through visual and, secondarily, textual means. Posters are neat and organized. Less is more. Once you have your text, see if you can cut one through visual and, secondarily, text. About your work, so they can decide if they would like to invest time in further discussion with you.

Basic Formatting

- Your poster title should be at least two inches high. Your title should be clear and succinct. Lengthy titles take up space better used for presenting substantive material.
- Include your name and your school/institution beneath your title (this information should be at least one inch high).
- The main content poster should be readable from at least three feet away. This means using at least a 20-point font for your text, with larger fonts for section headings, titles, etc.
- Use a simple, dark font that is easy to read. Minimize the number of fonts used (i.e. do not use one font for the title, one for the text, one for the graph labels, etc.). You do not want the audience to be distracted from the substance of your research.
- Your poster should be printed in landscape format (wider than it is tall). Typical poster sizes are formatted close to 4-3 width to length ratio, such as 36” wide x 24” tall, or 48” wide x 36” tall. The "Additional Resources" section below includes links to websites with layout templates to aid you in designing your poster.

Poster Layout

- Divide the contents of your poster by section, for instance:
  - Research Question
  - Methodology (e.g. large-n statistical analysis; small-n case comparison; discourse analysis; ethnography)
  - Hypothesis/Hypotheses OR Identities/Discourses/Representations analyzed
  - Variables/Cases/Data Sources & Data Tables
  - Findings, Conclusions, and Implications for theory and policy
- Each section should have its own separate section and be spread neatly throughout the poster. Avoid clutter—the goal is not to fill all available space, but to neatly illustrate key elements of your research. Do not use more than 1-3 colors for the entire poster. Remember you are going for a "clean" look, and that short lines of text are the easiest to read. Better yet, use your space for tables, graphs, illustrations of your explanatory model, or data tables.

All posters should be printed using the Large Format Printer located at the Technology Services Desk on the lower level of Bender Library. Details on using the Large Format Printer are provided below. Before printing you should make sure to consult the poster printing guidelines listed below for additional guidance on layout and formatting. The New Media Center on the lower level of the Library can assist you with the various software options used for designing posters.
**Using the Large Format Printer**

The Large Format Printer in Bender Library is provided to support the American University research community and is reserved for academic use by current AU Faculty, Staff and Students. You will need to set up an appointment to print your poster by emailing autechservices@gmail.com. Each print can take about 20 minutes and lines may form, so please plan ahead.

To print your poster, you will need to bring a valid student ID and a completed .pdf file of your work. Your finished file should be saved as a .pdf file regardless of the design program you used to create the poster. Cash and EagleBucks are accepted as payment. There are three paper size options available for printing your poster:

- 24” roll ($4.50 per linear foot)
- 36” roll ($4.75 per linear foot; a 36” x 48” poster as described above will cost $19)
- 42” roll ($5.00 per linear foot)

**Using Graphics**

Use color pictures, graphs, charts and/or tables to illustrate your points. This is one of the strengths of poster presentations. The idea is to make the poster as visually interesting as possible for your audience, so that it will "stand out" in the crowd and lead passers-by to engage you in conversation about your research. However, your graphics should be just as easy to read as your text. For example:

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**Do not do this!**

This graph is unreadable. It drowns the reader in minute details. Although it does make use of both colors and line lengths to report two variables at once, the lines (and headings) are too small to be readable.

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Moving in the right direction...²
This graph uses just two colors, and features a clear scale on the Y-axis so that your readers immediately know what is being measured (number of appearances per party, per network). Blue and red are also an effective color choice because they match the traditional colors of these two parties. However, the graph is still falls short in terms of getting the meaning across. Quickly: which network, between CNBC and MSNBC, was more favorable to Republicans? If it took you longer to figure this out than it would take to read the same figures off a table, your graph is not doing its job.

Another step...even better!³
This graph uses the same colors from the previous data, but has chosen a better format for answering questions about favoritism: the pie chart. It’s now far easier to get a sense of which networks favored which party; and as a bonus, the size of the pie charts themselves can be allowed to vary to distinguish between the channel with the most overall appearances by politicians of either party (MSNBC) and the channel with the least (CNN). This graph serves your data: it doesn’t just reproduce it in graphical form. This makes it a far more useful tool in terms of quickly conveying information to a viewer.

**Additional Resources**

- **Colin Purrington**: Colin Purrington is a graphics artist and has written a process on scientific poster design for maximum impact. The website contains lots of great advice, helpful illustrations, and downloadable poster templates.  
  [http://colinpurrington.com/tips/academic/posterdesign](http://colinpurrington.com/tips/academic/posterdesign)

- **Do's and Don'ts of Poster Presentations**: An older resource, but the ideas and design principles are still very relevant.  

- **Cornell University Center for Materials Research**: This resource helps you to keep your academic poster "from looking like an abstract painting."  

- **NC State University Poster Guidance**: A very thorough resource, this site can help you plan, design, and hone the message of your research poster.  
  [http://www.ncsu.edu/project/posters/](http://www.ncsu.edu/project/posters/)

- **PowerPoint Poster Templates**: A collection of free PowerPoint templates for posters of different sizes, layouts, and color schemes.  