

# McNair Scholars Program

## Guidelines for Preparing Research Posters

**“The purpose of a poster presentation is to create rapid, concise, and visual communication of research.”<sup>1</sup>**

**The poster is an advertisement for your research:**

Before beginning to put your poster together, consider the context in which any research poster exists. Posters don't exist in a vacuum, but in a venue:

- There will be many posters competing for limited attention
- People will be standing and strolling
- Their view may sometimes be obstructed
- There will be many interrupted conversations
- The venue will be relatively noisy
- At a professional conference (less so on the undergraduate level) people expect to walk away with a handout; this handout is your “last word”—not the poster. *The job of the poster is to make viewers want the handout.* This is why you need to think of the poster as an advertisement for your research.

**How to engage viewers under the circumstances described above:**

If the poster is your advertisement, the viewers could be said to be “channel surfing.” How do you get them to stop at *your* poster?

- **Use color**
  - Use color wisely and sparingly
  - Use color mainly for titles, subtitles, and visuals
  - Incorporate CMU colors
  - If at a loss, use the “prepackaged” colors in PowerPoint
  - Some color combinations are less legible than others: light print on dark background; two colors of similar intensity (light print on light background or bright print on a bright background)

- **Use visuals**
  - A visual is worth a thousand words—*regardless of your field*
  - Make visuals simple (not a huge field of data, for example), so that they make a point without having to study them closely
  - The visuals will draw the eye, therefore:
    - The title should go all the way across the top
    - Have a visual in every column
    - Visuals always need titles, and sometimes need captions
  
- **Use overall design to appeal to your viewer**
  - The main title should span the entire poster, and be large enough to be read from several feet away
  - Try to use three columns rather than four
    - Yes, that limits the amount of text—that’s the point
    - It also makes your visuals bigger—that’s the other point
    - Bonus, there is more “white space” on the poster—this is appealing to viewers, makes the poster easier to read, and makes what *is* there higher impact
  - Avoid having subsections overflow into the next column
  
- **Be focused and concise**
  - Decide on a central focus—and stick to it
    - This is not your research paper—don’t turn it into one
    - Devote more space to “Results” and “Conclusion” relative to the other subheadings
  - Avoid long sentences
  - Avoid long paragraphs
  - Use bullet points to convey concepts quickly
    - Bullet points do not need to be complete sentences
    - Be sure that they have enough information to be understandable
  - Use language appropriate to the venue
    - Define special terminology and acronyms as appropriate
  - The research presented in the poster should be completely understandable (by someone in your field) without you being present to explain it

## **You are also an advertisement for your research:**

Conferences are about networking, not just finding out about current research in your field. You want people to take note of your work, and make connections to it—and thereby to you. You never know where the next collaboration will come from.

- Have “elevator” speeches of your research project at the ready
  - Practice a 30 second version and a 60 second version
  - Practice answering questions you are likely to get—keep answers short. Just because people ask you questions doesn’t mean they want to hear a speech about it. Short answers invite further questions, which can turn into a conversation—thus making a *real* connection.
- Handouts
  - Possibilities include reproductions of your poster or short versions of your research paper
    - Take advantage of the second side of the handout for your contact information, research interests, professional affiliations, etc.
  - Business cards
  - Larger format cards with an outline of your research—these also have two sides
  - Use color if possible

## **Use these guidelines to analyze the visual impact of the McNair sample posters available to you on SharePoint.**

Below are the file names of posters that do something particularly well. Look at them to see if you agree. Then look at some of the posters that aren’t listed and analyze them visually: what works and what doesn’t? This analysis will help you figure out what you want your poster to look like.

- Donnesha:
  - Nice use of a title spanning the entire width of poster
  - Three columns makes the poster easy to read, but all the essential information is there

- The content is self-referential: it uses the same letters or numbers consistently in multiple subheadings
- Brooks:
  - This poster is about English literature, and still manages to include graphic elements. It is fair to say that scholarly work in English literature typically does not use tables, charts, graphs, or artwork of any kind. Yet John managed to pull it off. If someone in the field of English literature can do it, anyone can.
- Demski:
  - Here's a good example of a four-column poster, but with one text box that spans two columns. Interestingly, this move creates a graphic element in itself, serving to break up what might otherwise be a *lot* of text.
- Strath:
  - This poster has three columns of unequal width, which adds visual interest, along with the many visuals.
  - The subheading "What's Next" invites conversation.
- Lepley:
  - This poster is virtually all visuals, but it seems to fit with the research. Though this won't work for every field, I imagine that this poster would invite a lot of conversation.
- Kostanecki:
  - This poster has an interesting use of color in the textboxes, which creates a kind of visual in itself. Some boxes have blue backgrounds, some have tan backgrounds, and some have white backgrounds. This keeps the eye moving, and lightens the overall effect of the poster. For a contrasting example that uses only one color, see Nielsen's poster.
  - There are two boxes of graphs on this poster: note how simple they are. It's easy to imagine that there was much more data than this that could have been included. However, since no one is going to study a poster to read it, it shouldn't be there.

<sup>1</sup>Hoffman qtd. by Koskinen at the University of California at Berkeley Physics-Astronomy Library website: <http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/PHYS/posterguide.html>.

This is a great resource for structuring your poster. It walks you through the process step by step, and it also has useful links. Note, however, that it is not designed in an easy to read fashion. The graphic elements (numerous text boxes) overwhelm the text, making the whole thing hard to read!