

Ten simple ways to screw up your poster presentation

Imagine one day when you are a fourth year PhD student and your excitement for science, at least for your PhD project, has long gone. Your supervisor comes to the lab and happily shares that you will be joining the upcoming conference in your specialized field. On top of that, you are told to present your (-lack of-) research results in the form of a poster. Yippee!

At first you start laughing because it must be a joke. But then you realise that your supervisor doesn't laugh along and isn't joking at all. Dreadfully, you go to the conference homepage to register.

You feel a slight joy when you see the conference takes place at a top location. You picture yourself escaping this world of international scientific confabbing... you already feel the Caipirinha sliding through your throat while leisurely hanging on the hotel balcony. But then you see this banner that reads "We strongly recommend attendees bringing an umbrella and anti-mosquito spray. It is monsoon season." Your escape dreams evaporate in a notion of tiring poster sessions and rain.

Such a bummer! You don't feel like sharing your science, let alone someone asking you a stupid question about it. Hence, you have to learn how to make a poster that creates zero interest and how to look like the last person in the room people want to engage with. Here are ten simple rules that will make you the ultimate social pariah and make your poster suck.

1. Stand in front of your poster and look like the lost extra of *The Walking Dead*

Or, look like the twin sister of Tina Belcher. Whatever grumpy character you try to imitate, key is to look unapproachable. You don't need to get last years' Halloween costume out. It works just as well without. Simply cross your arms and legs, let your eyes rest at a point on the floor about three steps away from you and press your eyebrows towards your nose as far as you can. Should this still not have the 'fuck off' effect you like it to have, take your cellphone out and hectically type or scroll through Instagram. Cellphones have the power to make you genuinely withdrawn.

2. Wear thick-framed glasses that are resting in the middle of your nose

Position your glasses in such a way that the upper half of the frame will be right in front of your pupils. This gives you the perfect *Cousin Itt* effect and makes it impossible to make eye contact with you. In case you want to make eye contact yourself, tilt your head so far to the back that the other person looks straight into your nostrils. It's awful.



Tip: You don't need actual lenses inside the frames. Empty frames will do.

3. Drag random by passers into a very long tour through your poster

There is nothing that stinks more than being dragged into an untargeted dead boring poster pitch which easily spans your whole coffee break. Speak slow and in a low, monotone voice. Give a lot of attention to unimportant details. Don't leave any rhetorical breaks because you do not want your audience to interject you at any time. Because every interjection could potentially shorten your pitch. This needs some practice (and zooming noises to break the silence while searching for words), but if you do get interrupted, immediately counter-interject a very high-pitched and loud "Let me finish" and continue monotonously wherever you paused.

I guarantee you that they won't ask any questions and leave as soon as they can once you finally finish.

4. Start negative, end negative!

People love being surrounded by positive people. So, your task is to be the opposite. Being generally negative isn't that difficult because you don't want to be at this conference in the first place. But you can still bring this negativity to the next level. J

Whenever someone comes close by and smiles at you, say something negative. If they carry a cup of coffee you can mention that the coffee tastes like the last awful sludge your grandmother brewed just before she died. Or you say something about the dreadful session you have just been to and how you believe the last speaker should have genuinely apologized for detaining everyone. If you can't come up with anything, you can always say something bad about the weather.

Abrasive comments about the keynote lecturer or the conference organisational team are the ideal way to round off any conversation: it makes people around you visibly uneasy and it will certainly save you loads of time on the tedious follow-up emails. Just say something like, "Wow, that keynote lecturer is a clown, don't you think?" or "I don't think I've ever been at a conference that was so badly organised."

Just don't be positive.

5. Use a yellow font on a white background

When your research sucks and you can't be bothered to go to the conference, but your supervisor tells you to go and present a poster.... That's the moment to go for a yellow font. The background color doesn't really matter anymore, because yellow is always hard to read.



But if you want to be damn sure no one's going to try, take a white background. Low contrast combinations are extremely tiring to read.

Alternatively, use blue + red. Blue letters on red backgrounds appear blurry to the human eye. Tatataaa, freak show!

6. Let text run over a background with a pattern or picture

You think blue on red is making you dizzy? Personally, I am afraid to get an epileptic attack if the background is changing colours and structures while I read! Good news is, I am not even epileptic.

Writing long texts straight over a photo or some random bamboo sprouts is a fantastic way to stop people reading or not even starting to read in the first place. And as a giveaway, it makes your poster look extremely chaotic too!

7. Plaster your poster with complicated equations when your audience mostly consists of medical doctors

Apparently, biologists have a reputation for avoiding mathematics. But as a biologist myself I dare say that medical doctors hate it even more. (I know, I am very prejudiced.) Complex equations have an immensely overwhelming power and it makes your audience feel ignorant and stupid.

I'm not aware of any study on the success rates of scientific posters with equations compared to those without, but there has been a study done on citation rates of papers with and without equations. Guess what? Papers with equations are cited much less often than those without. If you are interested, you can read the [paper here](#).

Hence, my recommendation: "Never spare on equations." Better safe than sorry.

8. No lure, long text, wrong format

Make your poster look dull as ditchwater. A jargon heavy, boring title. No pictures or colorful figures. No prop. And long, long sentences.

Poster size requirements are different for most meetings and are stated on the conference homepage, but don't bother checking them. Just go for A0 landscape. There is a great chance your poster won't fit on the board provided for you.

A good poster has no more than 500 words, a doable poster might have up to 1000 words. More than 1000 words on a poster is ridiculously much. Thus, you should go well above this. A nice try anyway to see how many of your lyrics fit on A0.



9. Have the most important information at the bottom of your portrait poster

Saving the best for last = saving the best for dust!

You don't want anyone to take home your key message? Or you don't even have a message? Use the classical trick of placing the 'most important part' of the poster (often the conclusion) at the bottom. Believe me, your audience is not going to bend over to get the plot.

10. Don't let anyone proofread your poster before you print

People are idiots and so are your colleagues. Just bring a fine marker and plenty of white correction tape with you to the conference. You can fix all your typos on the spot.

In a nutshell, it is super easy to scare people away with your body language, boring pitch or terribly designed poster. It's much harder to get and keep your audience hooked.

Good luck with making your conference suck!

