

Poster design is comprised of three phases: the information phase, the technical phase and the design phase. This guide will carry you through the three phases, helping you make informed choices about your poster project.

Phase One: Information

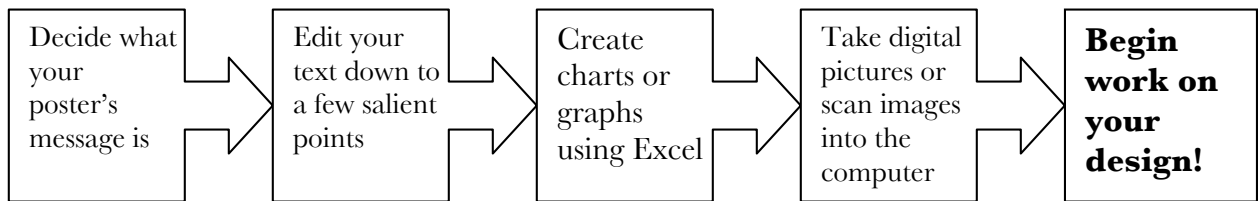
When creating a poster, you are faced with a lot of decisions. For those who are not visually inclined, this can be a nightmare. Where do I start? How can I take all of the information I have collected and the research I have done and shrink it down onto a poster? And visuals? I'm not an artist!

The good news is that planning a poster is a lot like planning a research paper. You need an outline, which you then fill in with details, and finally, you put the finishing touches on the paper by doing the actual writing. It's a process that anyone can follow.

Some questions you may want to consider before you sit down to plan your poster are:

- Is it for a conference or a class?
- Are there specific requirements on size, text, pictures, number of colors used?
- What information is vital for viewers to know in order to understand your project?
- What information can be assimilated through handouts or one-on-one conversation?
- What is your budget for printing?
- When does the poster need to be completed?

The biggest decision you will need to make is what your message will be. If someone could look at your poster for 11 seconds (and that is, by the way, the average time a person spends looking at a poster before moving on), what information do you want them to come away with?



Once you have decided upon a message, your next task is to gather all the components of your posters. If you plan to use a chart or a graph, you will need to collect data and import it into a computer. Text will need to be edited down into a few bite-sized chunks. Pictures will need to be taken or scanned. All of this should be completed before you begin to work on any design.

Spend some time answering the questions below before you begin work on your poster. Think carefully before answering. Use the answers you write down here to inform decisions you will need to make about the poster during the design phase.

The purpose of my poster is:

The audience for my poster is:

The most important information people need to glean from my poster is:

What constraints, if any, do I have according to the organization I am submitting the poster to?

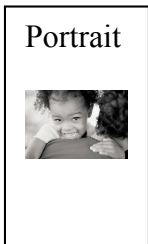
Phase Two: The Technical Elements of Design

Now that you've gathered your information, you can use technical specifications to inform the design choices you will make in phase three. Poster design is a revision process, and you may have to go back through each of the three phases to ensure that your poster is ready for print.

Here are some technical guidelines you can follow when designing your poster. Remember, if you have specific criteria that must be met (such as for a conference), follow those rules first. These are only guidelines, not rules. An effective poster is, ultimately, one that conveys the message succinctly and successfully. There are multiple ways to do this.

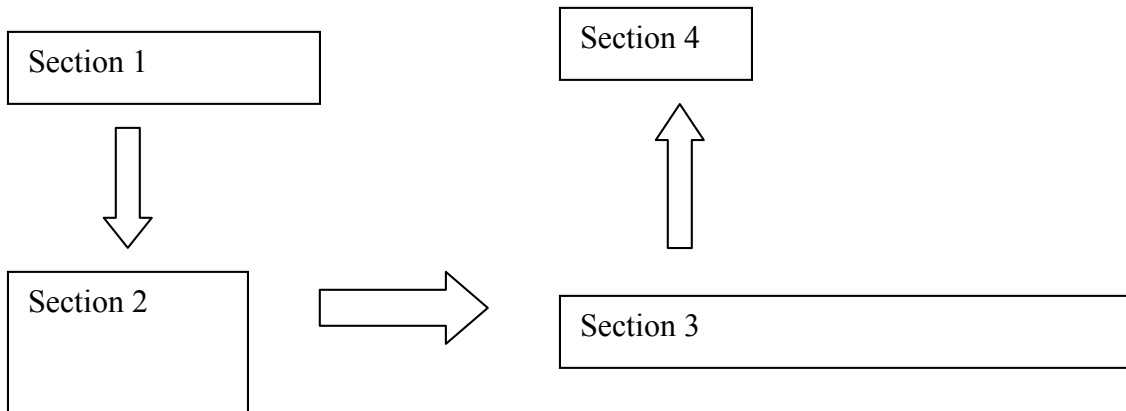
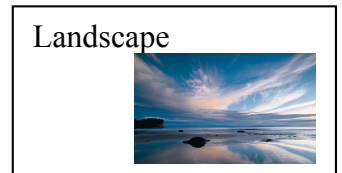
Size: Some common poster sizes are: 11"x17", 18"x24", 24"x36", 30"x40", 36"x40" and 42"x72". Remember the larger the poster, the more expensive it will be to print. Call ahead to your printing shop and ask what sizes they can print, and how much it costs. Unless you are given specific guidelines, you can use these factors to help you determine what size your poster should be.

Layout: There are two main layouts, portrait (vertical) or landscape (horizontal).



Your layout should clearly lead the audience through your poster. You can use color and images to draw the viewer's eye to specific sections of the poster first. Most people view things in a Z-pattern. Left to right, top to bottom, just like you read a page in a book. If you plan to break from this layout pattern, you will need to use

design elements to lead the viewer to certain sections in order. This can be achieved in a variety of ways, including using arrows or lines to guide the audience.



Before you go to the computer, you should try laying out your poster with pen and paper. There are a few ways you can do this:

- Sketch a few simple layout designs with good 'ole pencil and paper. You don't have to be an artist, just draw boxes for the title, text, pictures, graphs and charts. Try arranging the boxes in different ways. Save some of your favorites to refer back to later.
- Use masking tape and a measuring tape to create a border on a long flat surface like a wall or floor. Cut out different pieces of paper and give them names like 'Title' 'Bulleted List' or 'Chart'. Attach masking tape to the back and re-arrange the pieces in different configurations. When you find a configuration you like, take a picture of it.

Color: This can be a matter of cost. Many printers will charge more depending on how many colors you are using in your poster. This should not discourage you from using color in your poster, but it is something to be aware of if you are on a tight budget. You will want to make sure you are using color purposefully. Some things to note:

- Most people find it easier to read **light text on a dark background**
- Yellows and pale oranges can be difficult to read from far away
- Use different colors to highlight different aspects of your poster
- Make sure you have a reason for choosing a color—don't just put color everywhere because you think it looks cool, or you could end up with a rainbow mess!

Text: This is the most important part of your poster. It should be clear, concise and readable. Be careful not to overwhelm your audience with too much text. Some things to note:

Serif fonts have fancy additions to the letters to lead you from one to the next, like cursive writing.

- Serif fonts will lead the eye easily from one word to the next
- Sans-serif fonts are often used for titles because they are very clear and precise
- Chunk your text into different sections to make it more accessible to the reader
- More detailed information can be imparted in handouts or face to face discussion
- Use bullet points or numbers to break up long paragraphs
- Use arrows or lines to guide your reader from one section of text to another.

Sans-serif fonts are simple and plain, much like printing.

- All your text should be readable from 3-5 feet away (without squinting!)
- Do not use a point size you would use in a paper. No one will be getting that close to your poster.
- Text smaller than 24 point will be difficult to read
- Your poster should not be your paper made bigger! It is a summary of your work, not the work itself.
- Fonts should be consistent.
- Do not overload the poster with text. Remember, your typical audience member will look at the poster for 11 seconds!

Graphs and Charts: To create a graph or a chart, you will need to enter your data into an Excel spreadsheet and then port it over to Powerpoint with a key. Make sure that you label your graph or chart as clearly as possible. Try to reference your graph or chart in your text to tie it into the overall poster (ex: “The pikachu likes hamburgers better than fish food (figure 5)”). Some things to note:

- Make sure graph and chart colors are different from colors you have used elsewhere in the poster, or if colors are the same, that they tie in directly with other portions of the text. (ex: You have a graph depicting hamburgers eaten and fish food pellets eaten. The portion of the graph representing the hamburgers is blue. The portion representing the fish food pellets is red. You also have two text boxes, one listing the nutrients in hamburgers, and one listing the nutrients in fish food pellets. The hamburger text box is blue, and the fish food pellet text box is red, tying the text to the graph)
- Graphs and charts should be viewable from 5-7 feet away
- Make sure that each chart or graph is relevant to your topic matter and explained in your text

Pictures: Pictures and images should tie into the theme of your poster, enhance its attractiveness, and provide a draw for an audience member. Like the charts and graphs, make sure to reference your pictures in your text to tie it in (ex: “The pikachu (figure 2) is a small, furry yellow animal.”) Some things to note:

- Make sure your images are of high quality and a high resolution (300 dpi is used for printing).
- If you choose to find pictures on the internet, such as on Google image search, make sure you choose ‘large’ images. Make sure that you are saving *the image* and not *the thumbnail*.



- Avoid images that are too small or of too low a resolution. These images will look pixilated when you print your poster.
- If you choose to use clipart in your poster, be aware that these are common images everyone has access to, and has probably seen before. When we see an image a number of times, our eyes become accustomed to it, and we will pass over the image without inspecting it. The artwork you hung on your wall a few months ago was very striking when it was first put up, but has now become commonplace—you skip over it with your eyes. Clipart is often used in posters because it will easily scale up without become pixilated. However, you may find yourself standing next to someone who has used the same image as you on her poster!
- Pictures should be viewable from 5-7 feet away
- Make sure your images are relevant to your poster topic, they should not be exclusively for show
- Do not overload the poster with images. More does not equal better

The average time spent looking at a poster is 11 seconds.

This text is meant to stand out because it is important. How can you emphasize important text in your poster?

Phase Three: The Subjective Elements of Design

All right! We've gathered our information, looked over the technical, practical aspects and our next step is to look at the subjective design elements of the poster. It doesn't seem as overwhelming as it did in the beginning, right?

Design becomes much easier when you have already made choices about your poster. Once you have limitations, it's very easy to work within constraints, and let your research inform your design choices.

Subjective elements of design are choices you make outside of the technical and informational aspects of designing the poster. Some subjective design elements include:

- Colors
- Layout patterns
- Font choices
- Pictures

It's important to remember that there is no wrong answer when using subjective elements. We've all seen an article of clothing or a decoration and thought, "That is hideous. How could anyone think that looks good?" *Someone* did.

Now you'll need to make some choices about your work. Although this can seem overwhelming, you can break design down into several easy-to-answer questions, and basic common sense. Once you answer the questions, you will have your design. You can use the questions you answered in phase one, and the technical elements of design you learned in phase two, to help inform your decisions. Remember, there are no wrong answers.

Layout:

Will the poster be landscape (horizontal) or portrait (vertical)?

How can your layout make the most important points of your poster stand out?

How will your audience member know what parts to read first, second, third, etc?

Will you use arrows?

Will you use a border?

Font:

- What type of font will you use? Serif (Times New Roman) or sans-serif (Arial)?
- How big will your text be?
- What color will your text be?
- Will some of the text be larger than other parts?
- Will some of the text be a different color than other parts?
- What kind of mood are you trying to evoke with your text (**Comic Sans** looks bright and childish, while *Brush Script* looks very dramatic)?
- Will you bold, underline or italicize parts of the text to make them stand out?

Pictures:

- How many pictures will your poster have?
- Do the pictures help inform your audience on your topic?
- Do the pictures act as attention-grabbers to interest audience members in your poster?
- Do the colors in the picture compliment the other colors on your poster?
- Do they stand out?
- Does your picture have a border? What color is the border?

Color:

- Will your poster use color?
- What color will your background be?
- What color will your border be?
- Is there a specific range of colors you are trying to use?
- What color is your background?
- Do different elements of the poster have different background colors?
- What colors are your graphs and charts going to be?

Because design is subjective, you may want to ask for several opinions from friends and peers. Ask them to stare at your poster for 11 seconds and then ask what jumps out at them, what they remember. If it's what you want—great! If not—maybe you should reconsider some of your design choices.

Poster design is a process of revision. Make sure you plan far in advance to give yourself enough time to revise your work.

Good luck!