

Tips and guidance on preparing an academic poster for the NET conference

Academic posters are used for a variety of purposes but are essentially communication and networking tools. They can be a highly effective means of sharing knowledge, promoting some aspect of your work or triggering debate about specific issues relating to healthcare education.

Your poster needs to be clear, concise and easy to read. Below we offer practical guidance on how to create a poster that is effective, informative and achieves its purpose.

If you prefer to watch a video, the following YouTube presentation also provides helpful guidance: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AwMFhyH7_5g

Be clear about the purpose of your poster

Think carefully about the audience and what you want your poster to achieve – for example, do you want to grab delegates' interest or inspire engagement in a specific aspect of your education practice or research? A poster should convey a clear message about its overall purpose which should be relevant to healthcare education; this should include research question(s) or objective(s), as appropriate.

Tailor your poster to the audience

Knowing your audience will help to ensure that your poster will be readily understood. The NET conference attracts delegates from a range of countries outside the UK who may be unfamiliar with UK institutions and/or terminology, so please avoid using acronyms as these may be unfamiliar to some colleagues. The conference also attracts delegates from across healthcare professions and encourages cross-specialism sharing of best practice; please therefore ensure you take this into account when using terminology and, again, please do not use acronyms.

Think carefully about what content to include

Everything you include on the poster, including text and graphics, should relate directly to the purpose and focus of your poster. Given space limitations, you'll need to be selective, concentrating on those aspects likely to be of greatest interest to the audience.

When presenting data/data trends, use of charts and graphs can be clearer and more effective than tables. When creating images and graphs, it is important to use a high resolution (at least 300 pixels/square inch) so they are sharp and clear. Also, charts and graphs are usually more effective if they are simple – two-dimensional graphs are usually clearer than three-dimensional ones. Every graphic and figure should be labelled with a short legend.

It is also good practice to include references, your contact details and relevant web links.

Think carefully about the design and layout of your poster

It's important to think carefully about how much text you need to explain the purpose and focus of your poster, the background, research methodology/methods (if appropriate) and any findings/conclusions/take-home message(s). Aim to produce a poster that is eye-catching, with its content visible from at least two metres, otherwise colleagues may not pause to look at it.

The layout should be logical, easy to follow and visually pleasing. It is essential that information is clearly sequenced, using concise headings and sub-headings. Text that is left justified (rather than fully justified) tends to be easier to read. Ensure that paragraphs are not too long. Use of bullets can help to break up text but should not be overused. The clarity of text can also be enhanced by increasing the line spacing.

The sequencing of information/reading order should be obvious. In English-speaking countries, people expect to read from left to right and from top to bottom.

The best posters are well balanced through careful arrangement of text and images/graphics. Try to ensure that your poster is not cluttered – it's easy to be tempted to include too much detail, resulting in reduced impact of the message. Less is definitely more in terms of the overall impact of key messages.

Text size and use of fonts: the main text (arranged in appropriate chunks) should be less than 600 words. Try to avoid using font sizes less than 24. Think carefully about style – no more than two fonts is advisable. Use capitals, italics and underlining sparingly.

Ensure that your use of colour does not detract from the text or images in the body of the poster. Using too many colours or colours that clash can be visually distracting (and remember that some people are colour blind).

Once you've completed your poster to your satisfaction:

- proof-read it very carefully to check for missing words/typos, etc.;
- stand back from it (at least 2 metres) to see what it looks like and assess its overall clarity;
- seek feedback: ask someone who has not seen your poster to read it carefully and provide some constructive feedback; it can also be useful to observe their reactions as they do this.

Criteria used to judge NET academic posters:

- Purpose: is the purpose of the poster clear?
- Quality and clarity of the information included on the poster: is the message clear?
- Design of the poster: does it demonstrate good practice?
- Overall visual appeal and impact of the poster: does it attract the viewer's attention?
- Relevance of the message to healthcare education.