How to create an academic poster

Posters are a common form of assessment and they require you to present your research in a very different way to essays and reports. This guide will present the most important stages in the creation process as well as offering a few tips for completing a good poster.

What to do first?

Think about the content before the visuals. You will end up doing more research than you will be able to portray on the poster, but you will then demonstrate your ability to prioritise the most appropriate elements. If you are putting a poster together with a group, consider the skills mix of the group. For example, can you identify who writes well and succinctly, or who might be a creative 'bigger picture' person?

1. **Research**
    Consider your brief, where do you need to look to find the information? Try to use a range of academic sources; it can be useful to find some data that you can display easily through charts and tables such as statistics.

2. **Contents**
    Through a limited word count you will need to demonstrate that you have read widely. Therefore, try to identify a range of debates and perspectives on the topic. As part of the planning process, decide what the overall message you want your message to portray. You are expected to use references. Plan the content in terms of key points before writing in full (if necessary).

3. **Navigation**
    This represents your structure. Think about how you want the viewers of your poster to find their way from the beginning to the end. Columns are helpful, and symmetry is usually expected, but the most useful way to manage their navigation is by numbering sections.

4. **Visual aspect**
    Once you have an idea of your contents and a rough outline in mind, start thinking about what images and data you wish to display alongside the text. Ask yourself what value these add to the poster overall. Do not overcrowd your poster with information, people's eyes will need a break now and again when engaging with it. A rough rule of thumb is around 30% text, 40% white space and 30% graphics. Ensure that any visuals you do not create yourself are accurately referenced.

5. **Sense check!**
    Think about your assignment brief and what you have been asked to do. Perhaps sketch out your initial thoughts and ask a friend if your message is clear with appropriate evidence. If you can, this is the time to walk away for a few days and clear your mind. When you come back to it with fresh eyes it is likely you will see the poster in a different light.

6. Fonts and colours

Choose a sans serif font, such as Arial or Verdana, that is easy to read. Make sure the text is legible when standing back to look at it with the finished version. In terms of colours, it is important to choose colours which go well together visually. Consider selecting colours which appear next to each other on a colour wheel, but don't have more than 2 or 3 colours as this makes a poster look messy. You may want to group associated points or data by colour so it is clear that they relate to each other. Ensure you have high contrast between text and background.

7. Refining the design

Once you have made all these decisions, think about the specifics of your design. How will everything fit together, make sense to your reader and address the requirements of the assignment brief? A thin black line around the border of the poster can help it to stand out, and text boxes can help to break up the text.
It is likely that this will involve some trial and error, so don't worry if your first draft isn't perfect!
If you will be standing by your poster to present it, consider coordinating your clothes or accessories with the colour scheme

Final tips

- Leave plenty of time to format and proofread your poster
- Any data that you include must be presented as clearly and simply as possible
- Print out a test copy to check how it looks on paper
- If you have to do any primary research, make sure you describe how you did your research. Was it literature-based or did you interview / survey people? Justify this approach briefly, perhaps use a reference to support your choice. Be clear why every element is on your poster - anyone viewing the final product will need to work it out for themselves. Irrelevant material may confuse and mislead.

Academic Poster Examples:

Example A – Learning Development tutorials have a measurable impact on attainment
Example B – A new approach to university-wide learning resources