

Respect the poster

By Anila D’Mello and Oliver Flynn

Anila began to work on her poster 1 week before the conference. The quality didn’t matter that much, she thought. After all, hers would be one in a sea of other boring posters, each nervously guarded by a grad student. “No one is even going to look at it,” she told herself. Anila—a third-year graduate student at the time—considered presenting a poster an obligation, merely what she had to do to secure entry to the conference. She scanned her computer for last year’s template, replaced the old content with some new text and figures, and called it done. She was much more interested in scouring the conference schedule for cool talks by famous scientists, anyway.

Fast-forward 1 week. The poster session was winding down when two scientists approached. Anila gave them her research synopsis and paused for questions. “Why didn’t you cut the electrodes to a different size?” one asked. The other nodded and looked at Anila expectantly. Unlike previous visitors, they didn’t seem satisfied with her broad-stroke responses and continued to ask probing questions. Anila hadn’t expected anyone to take her research this seriously, and she wasn’t prepared to defend the finer points of her work.

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The visitors began to talk with each other, swapping ideas and discussing ways to improve the methods, while Anila—embarrassed—stood on the sidelines. She couldn’t help but think that if she had been better prepared, she could have been an active participant in the discussion rather than a passive listener. When she relayed her story to her friend Oliver—a grad student in a different field—she realized that her experience wasn’t unique: He, too, had walked away from poster presentations feeling embarrassed.

Those experiences eventually set us on a new path. We wanted not only to mitigate future poster session misery, but also to get as much as possible out of presenting posters. We put more thought and time into our posters, and we quickly started to see the benefits. People engaged more deeply with our work, often resulting in meaningful, satisfying conversations that have helped shape the next steps in our research and prepared us for peer review. We've even received the occasional job or collaboration offer.

Now, as postdocs who have presented dozens of posters at conferences around the world, we know that there is a lot to be gained from a poster session. Here are some tips we picked up along the way.

TAKE IT SERIOUSLY. Presenting a poster may seem less prestigious than giving a talk, but it is a great opportunity—if you put in the time to prepare. Poster sessions leave more room for interaction and feedback, often in a more relaxed environment that's conducive to friendly advice. Don't brush it off. Practice your poster presentation in front of colleagues, friends, and family so that you feel comfortable describing the intricacies of your work and answering questions about it.

PUT CONTENT FIRST. Don't stress over making your poster a visual stunner. Instead, focus on including information that is essential to understanding your methods, results, and conclusions. Your poster should complement your verbal presentation, so when you're making it, ask yourself, "What information can I describe verbally, and what do I need to depict?" Put the latter on your poster using large, clear figures and brief bullet-pointed text. This will allow visitors to quickly evaluate your work and engage you in discussion.

BE CONFIDENT. Show pride in your work, keeping in mind that your poster presentation doesn't have to be flawless. Conference attendees will understand if you don't have publication-ready data. There's also no shame in saying "I don't know" in response to questions; in fact, acknowledging uncertainty can open doors for discussion.

DON'T BE DISCOURAGED. We've both been disappointed when our posters didn't draw as big a crowd as we were hoping—and equally taken aback when

a visitor was overly critical. You might not get the type of engagement you hoped for, but that doesn't mean your work isn't valuable.

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