

TIPS FOR IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR POSTER PRESENTATION

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Posters have become an increasingly popular format for presenting research at the annual meeting of the SAA as well as many other organizations. Poster presentations have a number of distinct advantages over oral presentations: they are an excellent way to present graphics that are too complex to be readily comprehended in an oral format; they facilitate much more dialogue and interaction between presenters and attendees than is typical of oral presentations; posters are better for initiating budding archaeologists into research presentations at professional meetings; and they can continue to serve educational purposes well after a meeting, especially if displayed in academic hallways or other public places. Preparing a high-quality poster, however, tends to require much more effort than a typical oral presentation, which is a major reason why many archaeologists are reluctant to venture into this presentation format. Still, that should not discourage you from trying your hand with posters, especially given that computer programs like PowerPoint and better access to plotters capable of printing high-resolution digital images make it easier than ever to produce a high-quality poster.

After designing and coauthoring award-winning posters at the 2001 and 2002 SAA meetings (Figure 1), I was invited to serve as a poster judge and join the SAA Poster Committee. I was then asked to communicate some of my ideas on how the quality of poster presentations can be improved, leading to this short article aimed at summarizing some of the tips I have learned over the years. You can also find many other tips online, using the Google search engine with the key words, "poster presentations."

My approach to poster design is drawn mainly from experience in preparing poster presentations at the Tri-society meetings (American Society of Agronomy, Crop Science Society of America, and Soil Science Society of America), where about half of the nearly 6,000 attendees present their research in the poster format. Since 1997, I have prepared over 20 posters for meetings at seven different professional societies and organizations, and I continue to learn ways to improve their quality.

My general impression is that posters are higher in overall quality at the Tri-society and other scientific meetings than at the SAA and most other archaeological meetings. The ASA-CSSA-SSSA Tri-societies explicitly recognize poster and oral presentations as being of equal status, and posters are even more strongly encouraged than at the SAA meetings. Although the official stance of the SAA is that posters are equal to oral presentations, the attitude of most archaeologists, at least those with whom I interact, is that posters are secondary. Over the last few years, this view has changed and the general quality of posters has improved, but we still have a ways to go.

Preparing Your Poster

The two biggest mistakes in poster design are trying to cram too much information into a poster and not explicitly and concisely stating the purpose, methods, and conclusions of the poster. I cannot overemphasize how important it is to resist the powerful temptation to crowd in too much data and text—it is much better to reduce the text to an absolute minimum. This is accomplished by breaking the poster up into some basic sections, such as a brief introduction, succinct research objectives or hypotheses, methods, results and discussion, conclusions, and references. A good poster contains all the elements of a written paper, but one written as clearly and concisely as possible. I recommend using bullets for the research objectives, methods, and conclusions to emphasize the main points you are trying to convey in the poster. The methods do not require much elaboration, and if you are using techniques that are already published, you should simply reference that and omit the details. Most of your results should be explained in figure captions using a few charts, diagrams, photographs, and simple statistical summaries; concentrating on just two or three main points; and highlighting major trends and comparisons. Striking images are crucial for grabbing and holding the attention of your audience. Use abbreviations and acronyms sparingly, and avoid overwhelming your audience with too many numbers or complicated graphs.

Evolving Holocene Landscapes and Cultural Land-Use Patterns in the Ballona Wetlands of Coastal Southern California

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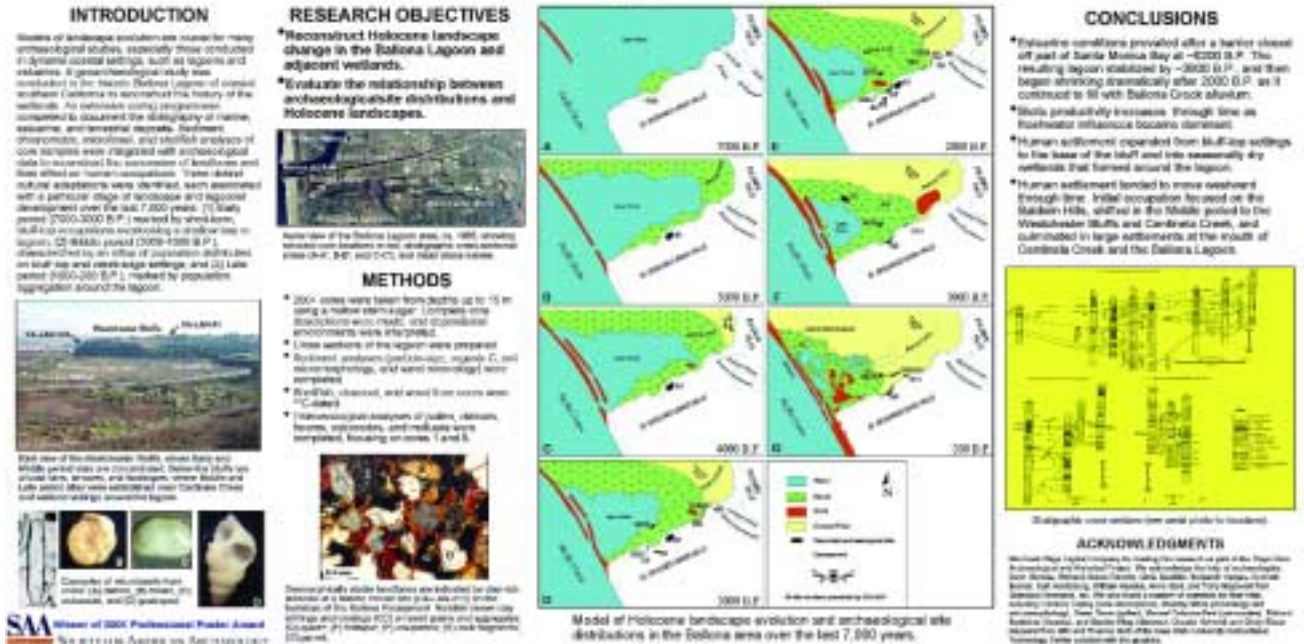


Figure 1: This is one of the author's award-winning posters, demonstrating the appropriate amount of written material, the logical placement of the poster elements, and the relative sizes of the fonts used for title, headings, and text.

SAA poster panels are normally 4 feet high by 8 feet wide, so you should design your poster to be at least slightly smaller than this. A width of 7.5 feet or less and a height of 3–4 feet is a good size. Your poster starts in the upper left corner and flows from left to right and top to bottom. The poster title, author(s), and sponsoring institutions should be listed at the top the poster. You should choose one background color or texture for your poster, using contrasting colors where appropriate to group text and images. All lettering must be easy to read from a distance of at least two meters. Use bold typeface for headings, labels, and bulleted text to enhance readability. Figure captions and text should be smaller than the type of the headings. As a rule of thumb, the poster title should use a finished type that is about two inches tall, with author names at least one inch tall, and all other text at least one-quarter to one-half inch tall. All text should be in sans serif type, like Arial, Helvetica, or Letter Gothic, because it is easier to read at a distance than serif type such as Courier or Times New Roman. It is also easy to read white fonts on a dark-colored background, although black fonts on light background also work quite well, especially in captions. Typical font sizes for my posters are about 72-point for the title, 56-point for author's names and

affiliations, 36-point for section headings, 20-point for bulleted text and captions, and no smaller than 16-point for other text, except perhaps in references and acknowledgements, which can be as small as 12-point.

Presentation graphics can now be integrated and produced inexpensively using computers. I use Microsoft PowerPoint to prepare posters, with a page setup at half the size I plan for printing. I then print the poster at 200% of this size, as a way to sidestep the maximum size of 56 inches wide permitted in PowerPoint. For example, to end up with a printed size of 7.5 by 3 feet (or 90 by 36 inches), the page setup needs to be set at a width of 45 inches and height of 18 inches. I recommend printing posters on high-quality glossy paper, especially if photographs are included. Here at Statistical Research, Inc. (SRI), we use Hewlett-Packard's High-Gloss Photo Paper CP (7 mil and 1.067 mm thick). Although durability is improved, posters should not be laminated because that can cause a glare.

Commercially, it can be costly to print posters—approximately \$10 per square foot at places like Alphagraphics and Kinko's.

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vania State University. There have been four symposia organized with the participation of over 50 specialists. A bilingual volume of memoirs was published in 2003, *Urbanism in Mesoamerica* (INAH and Pennsylvania State University). Two more meetings are scheduled for the first stage of this project, now directed by Angel García Cook and William T. Sanders.

Another field of interest for Mastache was the history of archaeological investigations in Mesoamerica. With Cobean, she published several essays including “La Arqueología” (in *La Antropología en México*, 1988, vol. 5, edited by Carlos García Mora and María de la Luz Berrocal, INAH) and “Mesoamerican Studies” (in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Mesoamerican Cultures*, 2001, vol. 2, edited by David Carrasco).

In recent years, Mastache had an increasing interest in Mesoamerican iconography and religions. An important achievement was her hypothesis that the principal pyramids of Teotihuacán, Tula, and Tenochtitlan were dedicated to similar deities and shared specific political and religious functions, indicating nearly two millennia of cultural continuity in Mesoamerica (“Ancient Tollan: The Sacred Precinct,” by Mastache and Cobean, *RES* 38: 101–133, Harvard University).

During over four decades in the INAH, Mastache sometimes occupied administrative positions. During part of the 1960s, she was head of the archaeological permits office at the INAH. During the 1990s, she directed the Departamento de Monumentos Prehispánicos, where she initiated wide-ranging programs for the conservation and investigation of over 120 archaeological sites that are open to the public.

Guadalupe Mastache’s brilliant career showed how a creative and energetic scholar can contribute major research, yet provide key administrative leadership and change professional and public communications in archaeology. Her family, friends, and colleagues can only say *adios* with the greatest sadness. ☞

—Robert H. Cobean and Barbara L. Stark

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Here at SRI, we estimated the actual cost of production at just over \$1 per square foot for the ink and paper, but that does not include the cost to purchase and maintain the plotter. The Department of Anthropology at the University of Arizona charges individuals \$3 per square foot, so a 3 by 7.5 ft (or 22.5 square feet) poster would cost \$67.50, which is quite reasonable and also allows the cost of the plotter to be recouped quickly if it is used a lot. At the Department of Agronomy at Iowa State University, where I was in graduate school, we recovered the cost of the plotter within one year. I strongly recommend that you print a small version of your poster so that you can review the draft carefully before printing the final. You can also share the small version with others who can review it and offer their feedback.

Presenting Your Poster

It is always a good idea to bring a few supplies, in case you encounter a surprise in the type of surface available for displaying your poster. Most posters can be attached to the fabric that is usually on poster panels, using the hook-end side of Velcro tape (which is readily available at most office supply stores). Push pins or transparent tape can also be used to mount your poster.

You should be prepared to answer questions about your research results and interpretations. You should also try to engage your audience in dialogue, or at least put them at ease to ask questions and offer comments or suggestions. You should also bring supporting information that might be appropriate for readers who have more than a casual interest in your research. Examples include pertinent publication reprints, handouts, or small versions of your poster. If you provide small printouts of your poster, I recommend using black text and removing all or most of the background colors that are in your full-size poster. It is a good idea to bring business cards that can be passed out or exchanged. You should also bring a pad of paper for recording the names and addresses of individuals seeking additional information, and for jotting down interesting comments and ideas. ☞