

Bench philosophy (9): Presenting posters

Eye-Catching Posters

Like actors and starlets walking along the red carpet at the Cannes Film Festival, researchers presenting their work at the poster session during a congress lecture break only have a single chance to attract the observer's attention.

Not a simple task in the bustling crowd of a poster session. Usually, researchers pass posters at a distance of two or three metres, so you must aim to attract the researchers strolling around during the poster session from a distance. If you adopt a few simple tricks, even the experienced but shortsighted emeritus will recognise your poster. Catching the observer's eye is only the first step towards a successful poster presentation. The main task is to keep researchers in front of a poster reading its content.

A poster should be planned like a research project. First browse the material you have and collect the results you wish to present. Concentrate on a few essential points. Check if you already have enough pictures (photos or illustrations) or if you have to produce new ones. A picture speaks more than a thousand words; that is why a poster should be apportioned into two-thirds pictures and one-third text. A good picture imparts information much faster and more comprehensibly than a long text, which is hard to read in passing. Think

about the questions that your colleagues are likely to ask before you start preparing the poster. In most cases it is easier to clarify a question with a picture than with a lot of words.

Show your objects in maximum size or choose reasonable cut-outs. Every picture should be silhouetted against the background but pay attention to strong contrasts. Create your pictures with 300 dpi (dots per inch) so that it's possible to enlarge them without any problems. The quality of the plotted pictures should not fall below 100 dpi.

Choose a coloured but unstructured, i.e. plain background (see Fig. 1), since background pictures can create a jerky and confusing effect. Light backgrounds are the best choice. However, if you prefer a dark background, use bright or white lettering to achieve a high contrast by inverting colours. This only holds true for headlines or short passages, long lines of text in this style are very hard to read.

Avoid using loud background colours like neon-yellow or fluorescent green; these colours are very exhausting for the observers eye. It is guaranteed to repel your colleagues' when they pass the poster. Instead, choose discreet background colours that do not compete with the presented content.

Tell a visual story

Guide the viewer's eyes with concise pictures, visualising chronological or methodical sequences. Orientate yourself in the reading direction, which runs from the upper left to the lower right of the poster. Emphasise your basic statement by highlighting it from the other poster elements through its size or by putting it into a box, circle or a surface having a different colour.

The describing text is subordinate to the picture. The text explains the picture, not the other way round. Place the text close to the relevant picture. Too much space between text and picture will leave the observer disorientated. The lower border of your poster should be wider than the upper one, the vertical borders being the small-

est. Frames or coloured boxes should embrace several pictures or text elements; this is a feasible way to summarise research results or to reconcile them. Moreover, maximum attention is drawn to these poster elements.

Three character sizes, one font family

The poster text characters should be of a size legible from a distance of approximately one metre. Do not use more than three different character sizes. Your poster will look most harmonious if it contains just one single font family. Classic serif fonts, like Times or Courier, are easy to read. If you don't like these and you only intend to use small text on your poster, you may also try sans-serif fonts like Arial, Verdana or Tahoma.

As a rule of thumb, a body text having between 30 and 60 letters is easy to read. Longer lines have higher line pitches that facilitate reading. Stress important text passages with bold, underlined, small caps or capital letters but you should apply only two letter types on your poster.

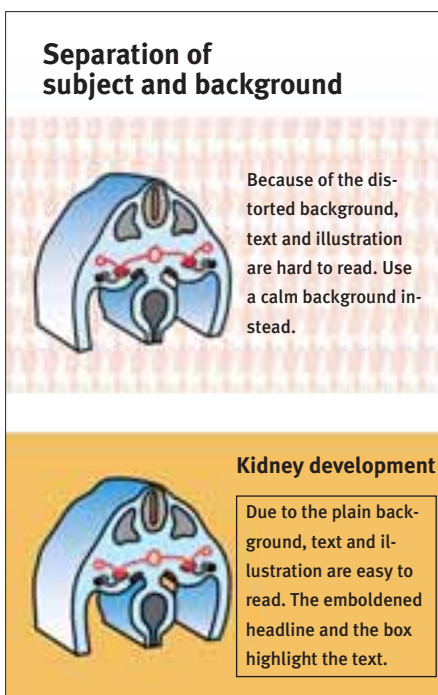


Fig. 1

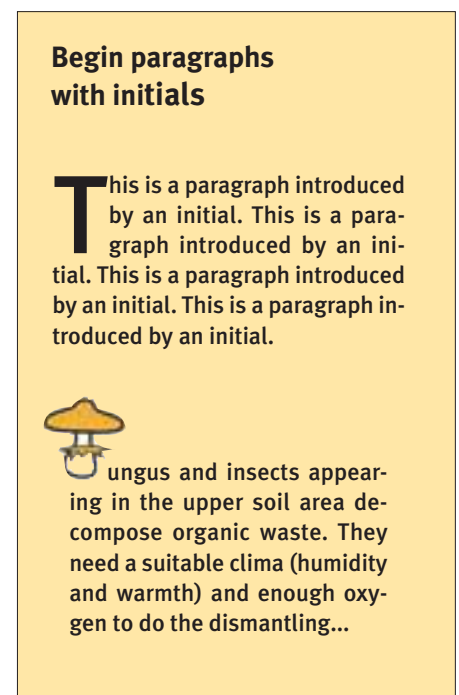


Fig. 2