

# The Basics of Poster Design

*Posters are a method of communication just like books, Web sites or presentations. The better your poster design, the more likely your audience will understand your project.*

## Getting started

Clear design starts with clear thinking. Before you begin shuffling charts, graphs and photos, ask yourself this question:

*If my viewer carries away only one idea, what do I want it to be?*

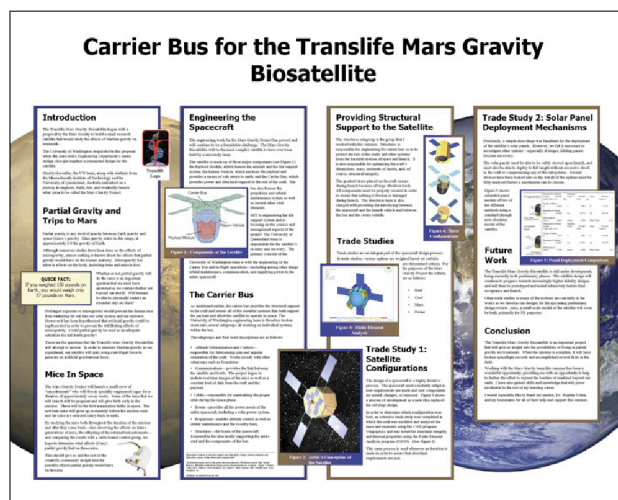
Now write down your answer.

This is the theme of your poster, the focal point. Everything you choose to include on your poster should support this theme.

Posters tell stories. Your poster tells viewers what you did, why you did it and what you learned from doing it. The poster should include a statement of the problem investigated, a description of the research methods used (if relevant), results or findings, and a summary.

For example, the poster to the right details the author's research in four columns. The first one introduces the overall project. The second and third explain the researcher's specific project and the methods used in the research. The final column gives the student's results, areas for future study and conclusions.

If it helps, try writing an outline as if you were writing a term paper. More visual than literary? Try clustering your ideas in balloons, then link them in order. The goal is to create a road map that will take the viewer from start to finish.



*Western viewers are accustomed to reading in columns from left to right. Using columns such as these makes information easier to follow.*

## Mastering the basics

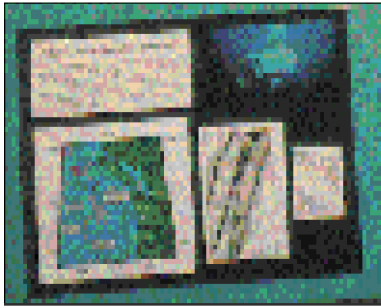
Keep your poster simple and visually uncluttered. Someone standing three feet away should quickly understand what each component is and why it is there. On a poster, columns are easier for the eye to follow than information laid out left to right.

Let's start with the basic basics:

□ Each poster should have a title. Any text used on the poster should be created on a computer to guarantee that the type is clear and easy to read.

❑ Background materials and graphics should have straight edges and even margins. If you are pasting separate components onto your poster, use a ruler and razor knife to cut out charts, graphics, photos and text.

❑ Illustrations and photographs should be clear and properly proportioned. Image files should be high resolution (200 dpi or higher), and tifs or gifs are best. Using the “drop-and-drag” method to adjust the width or height of an image can result in distortion. It’s better to resize images using commands such as “image size,” “scale” or “fit content proportionately.”



*Grouping elements on a common background gives viewers a clearer understanding of your material.*

❑ Connect your text to the graphic elements. If a paragraph refers to a diagram off to the side somewhere, say so. For example, “Wind blows over ocean, generates waves (Fig. 1).”

❑ Viewers can’t read small type from a distance. Use 24-point (24pt) type or larger (captions can be 18pt; titles should be at least 85pt).

❑ Be concise. Can you explain something better in a chart? Would bullets make your point more effectively than a solid paragraph? What about photographs? Edit your words ruthlessly.

As you jot down the elements you want to include in your poster, group together key or related information. Think about ways to convey those ideas as a unit. For

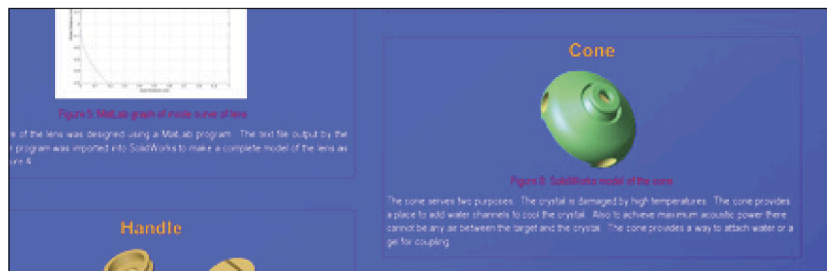
example, a section of poster (shown at left) clustered together a written explanation of where hydrothermal vent samples were obtained with maps and a photograph of someone obtaining a sample. Even viewers too far away to read the explanation could grasp the point of the grouping.

## Creating design unity

Okay, your research is done. You know what you want to say and you understand the basics of how to arrange your information. Now it’s time to start building your poster.

Graphic designers create unity through the use of white space, type and color. Let’s start with the first element.

Despite its name, white space is not necessarily white. White space (sometimes called negative space) refers to any area not covered by a design element such as a picture, a word, or even just a letter. White space guides the eye and makes the other components stand out. Too much and your viewer’s eye will wan-



*Don’t overcrowd your poster. White space around images and text gives the viewer’s eyes a rest and makes it easier to understand.*

der. Too little and the result is confusion.

The second design element is the style of type, or font. This font, for example, is called Palatino. If possible, limit yourself to three or fewer fonts. A font can be either “serif” like Times Roman or “sans serif” like Helvetica or Ariel. In general, fonts like Times Roman are better for the text while Helvetica and Ariel are good for titles and to label the figures.

The drop shadow effect can look blurry at large magnifications and is best avoided for technical posters. Using all capital letters in posters, like in e-mail, can translate as “unfriendly.” It’s better to stick to standard case just as you would in a normal sentence.

Color should be used for emphasis, but be aware of the connotations that certain colors and color combinations carry. Black and orange, for instance, can carry the connotation of Halloween. In most cases, the background of your poster should be a solid color rather than a pattern.

## Some final tips

Posters can be created either wholly on computer, or by printing out groups of components and gluing them to posterboard. Use the method that feels most comfortable to you.

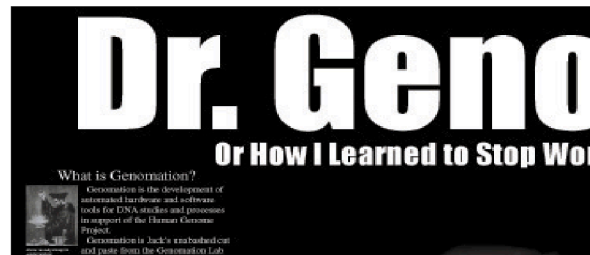
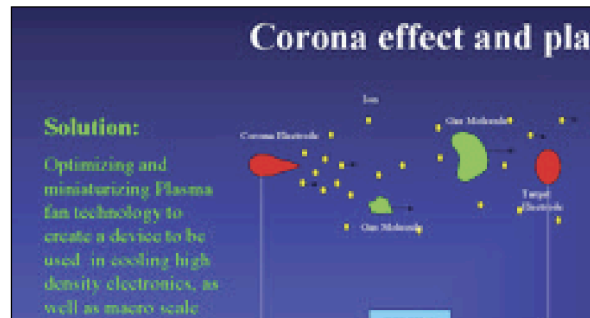
There are many design programs available. The best known are Microsoft PowerPoint and the Adobe programs – Illustrator, PageMaker and PhotoShop. Each company maintains a Web site to help you get the most out of their products. It is best to use a program that you or your mentor already know.

Sketch out your ideas early. Print out your photos, illustrations and other materials. Look at them from a distance. Get someone else to proofread your writing, if possible. Colors may print differently than they appear on your computer screen. You can avoid surprises by printing out a letter-sized proof on a standard color printer.

Due to the very high volumes in poster production on campus, turnaround time at campus printers is two full business days for printing and three if you need to have your poster mounted. Always request a proof, which is a scale model of your poster. If you don’t, any errors on the final poster are your responsibility, and you will be charged for the original **and** any reprints.

Remember good design can’t salvage poor research, but it can keep your good work from being overlooked.

*Serif fonts (right top) make it easier to read blocks of type quickly. Sans serif fonts (right bottom) are easy to read even at a distance.*



# Additional Resources

## General Information

### Creating Posters Using Adobe PageMaker and MS PowerPoint

<http://courses.washington.edu/~hs590a/weblinks/poster.html>

Designed for Health Services 590A, this Web site offers link after link of ideas and resources. Also check out the free guide from Teaching Support Services at the University of Guelph in Guelph, Ontario.

### How To Make a Great Poster

<http://www.aspb.org/education/poster.cfm>

This article from the American Society of Plant Physiologists walks you through poster making from idea to printing. Written by Dina F. Mandoli in the UW's Department of Botany, it includes ideas on fonts and colors as well as a list of materials.

## Specific Design Programs

### Microsoft PowerPoint

<http://faculty.washington.edu/robinet/poster.html>

### Adobe InDesign

[http://www.stanford.edu/dept/VAS/pdfs/ID\\_poster.pdf](http://www.stanford.edu/dept/VAS/pdfs/ID_poster.pdf)

### Adobe Illustrator

[http://www.science.smith.edu/resources/poster\\_printing/docs/AI\\_QuickRef.pdf](http://www.science.smith.edu/resources/poster_printing/docs/AI_QuickRef.pdf)

### Adobe PageMaker

[http://www.ices.cmu.edu/pagemaker\\_files/frame.htm](http://www.ices.cmu.edu/pagemaker_files/frame.htm)