Suggestions for Creating an Effective Poster
(Suggestions by Jeff Haugaard, Ph.D., Founding Director of The Honors College)

Poster presentations offer an opportunity to present your research to a broad audience and then discuss your results informally in one-to-one conversations with those who have the most interest in your research. Poster presentations can be less stressful for authors and can be more interesting for all involved, as the author and others have the opportunity to discuss methods and results.

In a poster session, audience members usually wander around, glance at each poster, and then stop at posters that catch their attention. To have a successful poster, you need display information about your research in a way that allows someone walking by to decide quickly whether to stop and read your poster more thoroughly. An effective design presents your message in a concise and interesting way.

The information provided here will help guide you through the process of making your poster interesting, to the point, and easy to read. When designing a poster, you must present your information using limited space. The key to creating an effective poster presentation is to obtain visual simplicity while presenting all the important information from your research. Plan your poster carefully.

Poster Materials

We will supply a white poster board that is about five feet wide and three feet tall, a stand for the poster board, and clips/tacks to attach your poster to the poster board (see the photograph above). Most students use one of three strategies for displaying their posters: (a) print the poster on individual pieces of paper and tack the pages to the poster board, (b) print the poster on individual pieces of paper, put those pieces on a large piece of paper or other material, and clip or tack that large piece of paper or other material to the poster board, or (c) create one large slab of film-encased material with all your poster information and clip that to the poster board (check with your advisor or department office about doing this).

Poster Content

While posters may vary in their appearance, most posters feature similar types of information. Your poster should include the following elements:

Title - This includes the title of your project, the people involved in the work, and their affiliation. Your title should be brief and descriptive.

Abstract - The abstract should consist of a brief synopsis of your project - what you set out to do, how you did it, and your key findings. The abstract is important, since it provides the viewer with an orientation to your work. Many people will read the abstract and then decide whether they have sufficient interest to read the rest of the poster.
Introduction - The introduction should begin with a brief description of the objectives of the project. The relevant literature should be described briefly. Include citations as appropriate. This section should end with a clear statement of the hypotheses or predictions that you tested.

Theory/Methodology - In this section, explain the technique/procedure that you used in your research. Be concise, but be sure to give sufficient information so that your audience understands your methodology clearly.

Results - Use this section to show the main results of your work. Because of the space limitations, you may need to decide which of your results are important enough to include.

Conclusion/Discussion - In the conclusion, you should discuss your main findings. Did your tests come out the way you expected? Why are your findings significant? How do your findings fit into the current literature? Your conclusion could also include what researchers could do to further explore the topic or research question.

References – Provide full references for the citations you include in your poster.

Poster Design

• Keep the writing straightforward. Avoid use of jargon and acronyms/abbreviations. Use words that people outside of your field can understand.

• Be concise. Use short, uncomplicated sentences or bullet points. Your poster will be most effective if it provides minimal text.

• Be selective in presenting results. Include only those that illustrate the main findings of the project. However, you should keep other results handy so that you can refer to them when asked.

• Use color to differentiate the layout of your poster and to add interest. However, avoid using loud colors or too many colors, since this may make your poster look amateurish or confusing. Choose background and foreground color combinations that have high contrast and complement each other. It is better to use lighter background colors and darker text colors.

• Use a standard, easy-to-read font such as Arial or Times New Roman. Choose one font and use it throughout the poster. Add emphasis by using boldface or underlining; italics are difficult to read. Do not use all upper-case text in your posters, as it can make the material difficult to read.

• Make sure you use a font size that is large enough for people to read from five feet away. Titles and headings should be larger than other text, but not too large.

• Graphs, charts, or other illustrations are effective for presenting information in a
small space. When creating multi-line graphs use lines of contrasting colors or different styles to distinguish them. Multi-line plots or plots with more than one variable should have a legend relating the plotted variable to the color or style of the line. Diagrams and drawings should be labeled. Clip art should only be used if it adds substance to the display. Otherwise, clip art distracts from the focus of the presentation.

• Maintain a consistent style. Inconsistent styles can interrupt the fluency and flow of your messages. Headings should appear in the same position on all pages. Graphs should be the same size and scale, especially if they are to be compared. If bold-face lettering is used for emphasis in one section, do not use underlined text for emphasis in other sections. Captions for graphs, drawings and tables should either be positioned at the top or at the bottom of the figure.

• Finally, review your poster design. Make draft versions of your poster sections and check them for mistakes, legibility, and consistency in style. Ask your friends, classmates, or professors to look at your poster and offer their feedback. Be sure to check your spelling and grammar.

On the Day of the Conference

Be ready for visitors before the poster session starts. Arrange half an hour before the beginning of your poster session to set up your poster. This will allow you plenty of time to make sure your poster is set up properly and will help you to avoid last-minute scrambling and correct for any set-up problems that occur.

During the poster session you will be standing next to your poster for approximately one hour, answering questions from those who stop to view your poster. Be sure to wear comfortable shoes.

You are an essential part of your presentation. Some people who read your poster will ask for more details and others will want to discuss the meaning of your results. You must be prepared to answer questions. Spend some time before the poster session refreshing your memory on the relevant literature, on the methods you used, and on all your results. Think about how to communicate this information in a clear, concise way, keeping jargon to a minimum.

You may be asked the same questions over and over again. This may feel redundant to you, but remember that each person will be hearing your answer for the first time. Maintain your enthusiasm and engagement with people viewing your poster and asking questions even if you have answered similar questions a number of times.

Remember to engage people who approach you and your poster. Make eye contact and smile at people walking by. Try not to get so engrossed while talking with one visitor that you accidentally prevent others from viewing your poster.