Academic writing at a glance: strategies used by L2 writers to capture and hold their readers’ attention at an academic conference poster session
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The poster as a genre

- **Form**
  - Size (e.g. 90 cm x 1.3 m)
  - Format (landscape or portrait)
  - Content (title, authors’ names, headings, body text, figures/tables, footnotes, acknowledgements, contact information)

- **Content:** IMRaD (Swales 1990)
  - **I** = What did you investigate, and why?
  - **M** = How did you investigate it?
  - **R** = What were the results of your investigation?
  - **D** = What do you make of these results?

Advice to poster writers (O’Connor 1991)

- **Content**
  - Prepare an outline with your audience in mind
  - Include the same information as for a 10-minute talk
  - Include a brief introduction, an outline of methods and materials, a main section devoted to results, and conclusions
  - Create an informative title that is short and meaningful and preferably comprehensible to non-specialists

- **Format and design**
  - Check recommendations re format and lettering
  - Fill the space attractively and informatively
  - Use a striking picture rather than countless words
  - Use colour to attract attention
  - Use graphs and photographs in preference to tables

- **Figures and tables**
  - Use figures in preference to tables
  - Write a short but informative (figure) titles
  - Make these titles the same size as subheadings in text
  - Put legends below illustrations and keep them short
  - Make labels on graphs and diagrams run horizontally

- **Lettering**
  - Use a medium-bold sans serif typescript (e.g. Helvetica)
  - Use capitals where conventionally used and lower-case elsewhere
  - Make capitals in the title at least 40 cm high
  - Write your name and address a little larger than the body text
  - Make subheading capitals 10–16 mm high
  - Make capitals in body text 6–8 mm high
The grammar of visual design (Kress & van Leeuwen 1996)

- **Information value**
  - Given and New (Left = Given, Right = New)
  - Ideal and Real (Top = Ideal, Bottom = Real)
  - Centre to Margin (Centre = Nucleus, Margin = Ancillary)

- **Salience**
  Factors that lend “weight” to an element
  - Size
  - Sharpness of focus
  - Tonal contrast
  - Colour contrasts
  - Position in visual field
  - Perspective
  - Overlapping
  - Presence of human beings
  - Presence of other potent cultural symbols

- **Linear and non-linear reading paths**
  - Traditional vs new reading paths
  - Horizontal vs vertical reading paths
  - Degree of help provided
  - Linear vs non-linear

- **Framing**
  - Frames = individuality or differentiation
  - No frames = connectedness, integration of information

**Purposes of present study**

1. To investigate O’Connor’s recommendations as predictors of success in poster writing
2. To investigate Kress and van Leeuwen’s theories of spatial composition as predictors of success in poster writing
3. To identify relevant content for a course in creating posters for academic conferences
4. To suggest relevant content for writing courses featuring other multimodal texts

**Materials**

- 29 conference posters (23 portrait, 6 landscape format)
- Poster competition (38 answer slips awarding 1st, 2nd and 3rd place to three posters)

  based on the following questions:
  1. Is the poster eye-catching?
  2. Is the main message immediately visible?
  3. Is the text inviting to read?
  4. Are the text, figures and graphs clear and well organised on the poster?
  5. Does the poster invoke your curiosity?
Method and analysis

- 16 posters analysed in detail (8 top and 8 bottom ranked)
- Criteria based on O’Connor’s (1991) advice about:
  - Organisation of content
  - Titles
  - Amount of text
  - Number of figures and tables
  - Typescript and size of lettering
  - Prominence of headings
- Criteria based on Kress & van Leeuwen’s (1996) definitions of:
  - Information value and salience
  - Reading path and framing

Results

- Default features of academic posters
  - IMRaD organisation
  - Title about 12 words long in large typescript (16+)
  - Portrait format
  - Use of figures, possibly tables
  - Sans serif typescript
  - Gradation of typescript size for title, headings, text
  - Distinctive headings
  - Use of colour
  - Use of columns and/or frames
- Key factors for successful academic posters
  - Clearly marked purpose or question
  - Total amount of text under 550 words
  - Generous use of figures (at least 7)
  - Two-line titles
  - Consistent headings
  - Most salient item in high information location (upper or left) and with conventionally salient content (ideal or given)
  - Clear reading path (indicated by columns and/or frames)

Further directions

1. Incorporate work on reading path and salience into academic writing courses (especially for multimodal texts)
2. Use theory and terminology of visual design to explore linear and non-linear texts
3. Expand the present study’s database to include other academic subjects
4. Investigate reader preferences with regard to layout and colour
References


Wolcott, Thomas, 1997, “Mortal sins in poster presentations or How to give the poster no one remembers”, Newsletter of the Society for Integrative and Comparative Biology, Fall, 10-11.