

Poster presentation 101: Make your work stand out at a conference?

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Poster presentations are a great way for medical students and residents to showcase their hard work on a project. Learning how to do a poster presentation means finding the best way to present the information so that your work can stand out from the crowd.

The deadline for abstract submissions for the 2022 AMA Research Challenge—the largest national, multispecialty research event for medical students, residents, fellows and international medical graduates—is July 12.

Held virtually, the event gives medical students, physicians and anyone else interested an opportunity to view research posters and presentations and network with other students, residents, fellows and international medical graduates interested in similar research. In advance of that date, catch up with this great expert advice on how to make the most of your poster presentation.

Learn about the winning projects from the 2020 and 2021 AMA Research Challenge events.

Don't wait until the last minute

“Plan ahead! It takes longer than you think to create a poster,” said Vineet Arora, MD, dean for medical education at the University of Chicago Pritzker School of Medicine.

In addition to planning for time to brainstorm to create the best poster, don't forget to build in time for your mentor and co-authors to review the poster and provide feedback for the revision process.

Also, give yourself time to ask people on other teams—people who haven't been engrained in your project—to give you feedback, said Luke R. Finck, EdD, assistant director of the office of medical student research at Vanderbilt University School of Medicine.

“It allows you to make sure that you get your point across clearly to those who weren’t a part of it,” he said.

And give yourself time to proofread for any errors and to double-check that your poster meets the guidelines for the conference, Dr. Arora said.

Be selective with information

The poster isn’t a place to put every single detail of your research.

“The message needs to be concise, simple and clear,” Finck said. “Ask yourself: ‘What is the point? Why should I care? How does it impact me? How does it impact my loved one?’ Then convey that point in one or two sentences.”

Dr. Arora echoes the importance of simplicity: “Sometimes students are so excited to share everything they did that it can detract from the power of one message.”

After determining your main point, Finck said, convey why you asked the question, what your hypothesis is, how you tested it and what the next steps are. “I always stress to include the limitations or next steps because no research is perfect,” he said.

Find out the four things judges look for in medical poster presentations.

Think through the visuals

Colorful posters with visual images that tell one central message are more likely to catch Dr. Arora’s attention. “Posters that are just a rehash of words tend to turn me away,” she said.

Students should think carefully about the data or pictures they use to “tell the story” of the project, using graphics to draw in viewers. And they should use the least amount of text possible—in a font no smaller than 24 points, and ideally closer to 44 points for the main text—to clearly convey the message.

“A picture is worth a thousand words,” Dr. Arora said. “Layout is critical to drawing the reader in. Think about what your main message is and how to support that.”

Finck noted that students shouldn't be afraid of leaving white space on the poster.

"It's not bad if it is balanced," he said. "Posters that are not saturated with text and figures that don't seem necessary are the ones that I am more likely to look at."

And, he said, while colors are great, they need to be minimal and consistent.

"Remember, too, that some people are colorblind or are unable to distinguish between certain colors," he said.

Get insight about the benefits of virtual poster competitions.

Interactions at the conference matter

Your work isn't done once your poster is hanging. At an in-person event, be sure to engage with conference attendees. The 2022 AMA Research Challenge will be held virtually, but the semifinals and finals have elements of presentations involved for competitors who advance.

Before the conference, "practice, practice, practice," Finck said. "You need to think about the questions that may be asked and how you will address them. You can tell when someone is not prepared."

Dr. Arora suggests medical students prepare a three-minute summary they can give at the conference about who they are, why their study is important, the main method employed and the results.