Learning the art of communicating effectively through posters

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Abstract

The skill of communicating effectively through poster should be encouraged for all undergraduates as the preparation process:

- sharpens focused thinking given the text limitation
- encourages creativity given the two-dimensional nature of the medium
- educates students on visual grammar.

Poster sessions and presentations are used by groups and individuals to inform and promote academic and professional research at a congress or conference. The visual impact provided by the various forms of posters adds to the vibe and depth in such intellectual gatherings.

The art of poster making however is deteriorating because of lure and mesmerising technological features of other media. This is evidenced by the decreasing participation in poster sessions and the disappearance of poster making from undergraduate curricula in favour of other presentation forms.

Posters have many benefits:

- they tell the story of your research even if you are not there
- you can 'stuff up' a lecture
- there is no need to plug it in to appreciate it
- it can hang in your department for years
- it informs you about the research in minutes!

In summary, if all undergraduates were to create at least one poster as part of the their curriculum degree and culminating at a whole of university poster competition then a vibrant research culture at undergraduate level will emerge and enhance a life long skill of visual grammar.

Why posters are different

Research is disseminated through different forms and mediums such as journal papers, conferences, reports, oral presentations, lectures and videos - all convey a message and all require planning and preparation.

Posters however are different as it presents 'visual grammar' to inform and unlike the other mediums it is:

- two-dimensional
- static
- can have colour
- needs to captivate the audience in seconds.

There are four keys aspects needed for an effective posters:
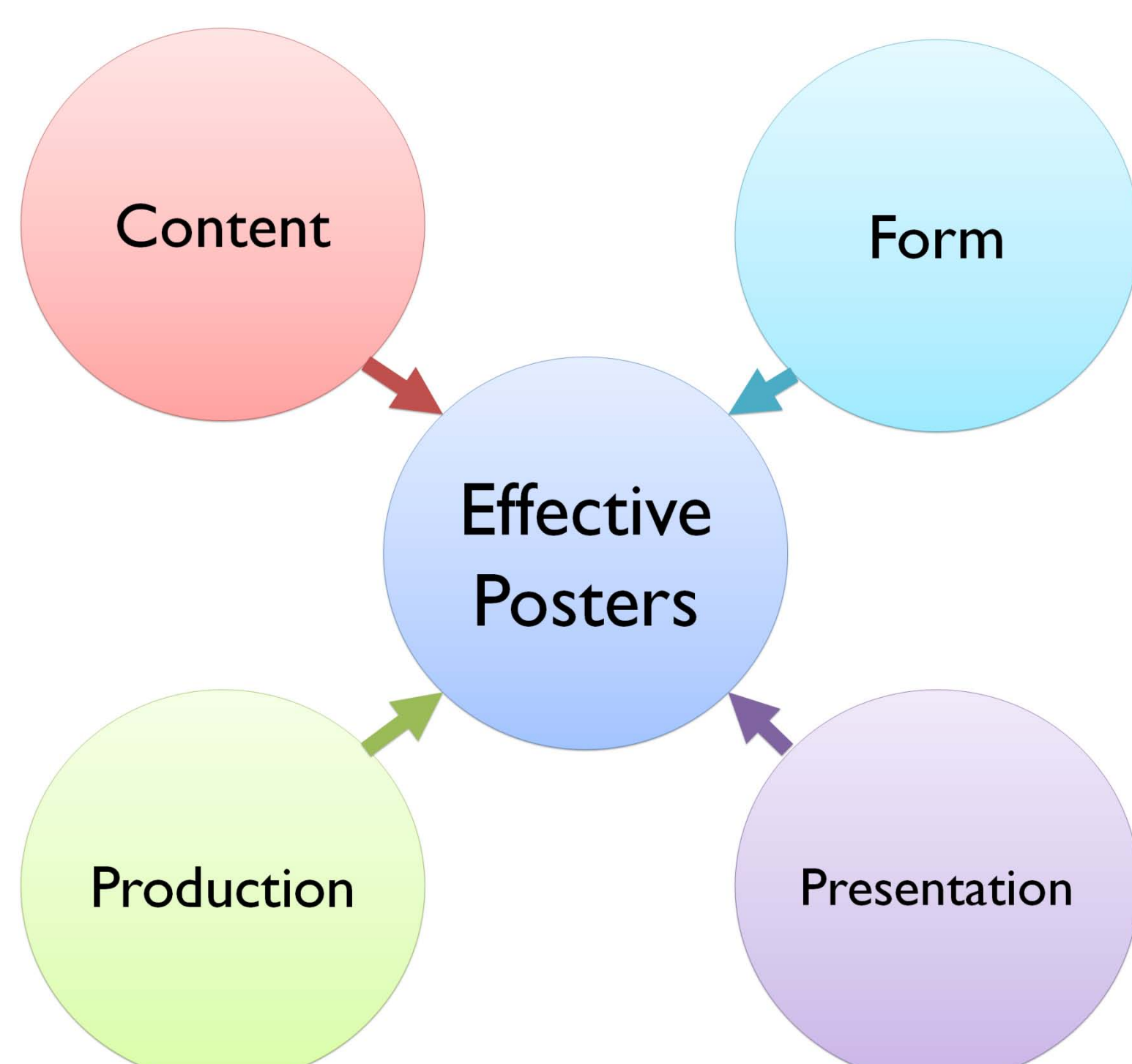
What makes an effective poster

Through discussions with academics and supported by research through websites, judges and critiques of posters do not break down the process of poster making but instead take the holistic impact a poster has on their senses and intellect as a communication medium. The following sums up their comments:

- Good visuals will never make up for poor content.
- Use the basic marketing tools to determine if you were able to 'sell' your concept
  - Attention (visual, colours, presentation)
  - Interest (hooks)
  - Desire (content and relevance)
  - Action (did I walk away with anything?)
- The poster should have clarity, appeal, readability.

On the other hand, poor preparation and presentation are a quick turn off. The often cited negative feedback are:

- crowded, busy, too wordy
- not enough 'white' space
- use of jargon, difficult to understand concepts
- clip art (unprofessional looking), amateur presentations
- wrong spelling, poor grammar and unedited work
- difficult to read graphs
- boring / bland presentation.

Useful links and references

Hess, G., Tonsey, K., Liegel L. 'Creating Effective Poster Presentations: An Effective Poster', viewed 11 August 2011, <http://www.ncsu.edu/project/posters/NewSite/index.html>

James Cook University, 'Academic Poster videos', viewed 11 August 2011, <http://libguides.jcu.edu.au/content.php?pid=120434&sid=1828564>

Poster gallery – PhD posters with helpful commentaries, viewed 11 August 2011, <http://phdposters.com/gallery.php>

Purlington, Collin website, viewed 11 August 2011, <http://colinpurrington.com/tips/academic/posterdesign>

University of Leicester provides a good tutorial, viewed 11 August 2011, <http://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/ssds/sd/pgrd/resources/designing-poster/designing-poster>

University of Melbourne, Design gallery of conference posters, viewed 11 August 2011, <http://www.rch.org.au/erc/design/index.cfm?doc_id=51>

University of Melbourne, Academic Skills Unit 'Academic Posters', viewed 11 August 2011, <http://cms.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0007/470059/Academic_posters_Update.pdf>

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Effective posters

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Content

Tailor fit your message to your audience and avoid disciplinary jargon by using clear language.

Types of audience
- Experts in your area
- Colleagues within your discipline
- General public

Keep in mind what you want your audience to learn
- Provide big picture
- Highlight significance of your work
- Focus your message throughout

Preparation tips
- Be bold and explicit (sparingly use 'the') - start with your title
- Make strong statements that your data will support
- Use active statements throughout
- State results in summary (upper left hand corner)
- Interpret your results for your audience in the conclusions
- Keep word count to a minimum

Production

One of the first decisions in poster preparation is the final form of the product. You must decide:
- size (often prescribed by conference organisers – A0, A1, A2)
- transport considerations
- finishing (laminated, poster board for mounting, silk or matte finish, fabric, other)
- software to create elements (PowerPoint, Word, Visio)
- computer generated or 'cut and paste' poster.

Computer generated

'Cut and paste' poster

Preparation tips
Create a draft – stand back 3 meters to check:
- message is clear and accessible
- balance of text and graphics
- photographs are not blurry (use 300 dpi).
Edit and evaluate:
- spelling, consistent spacing and alignments, labels for figures
- consider alternatives – move things around
- delete what is redundant – less is more.

Form

This is the fun part! Deciding on how your research information is presented is a balance of creativity and restraint. There are four major aspects to harmonise:

1) **Layout** – keep in mind the natural flow of our eyes
   - Orientation (landscape or portrait)
   - Number of panels – three or four
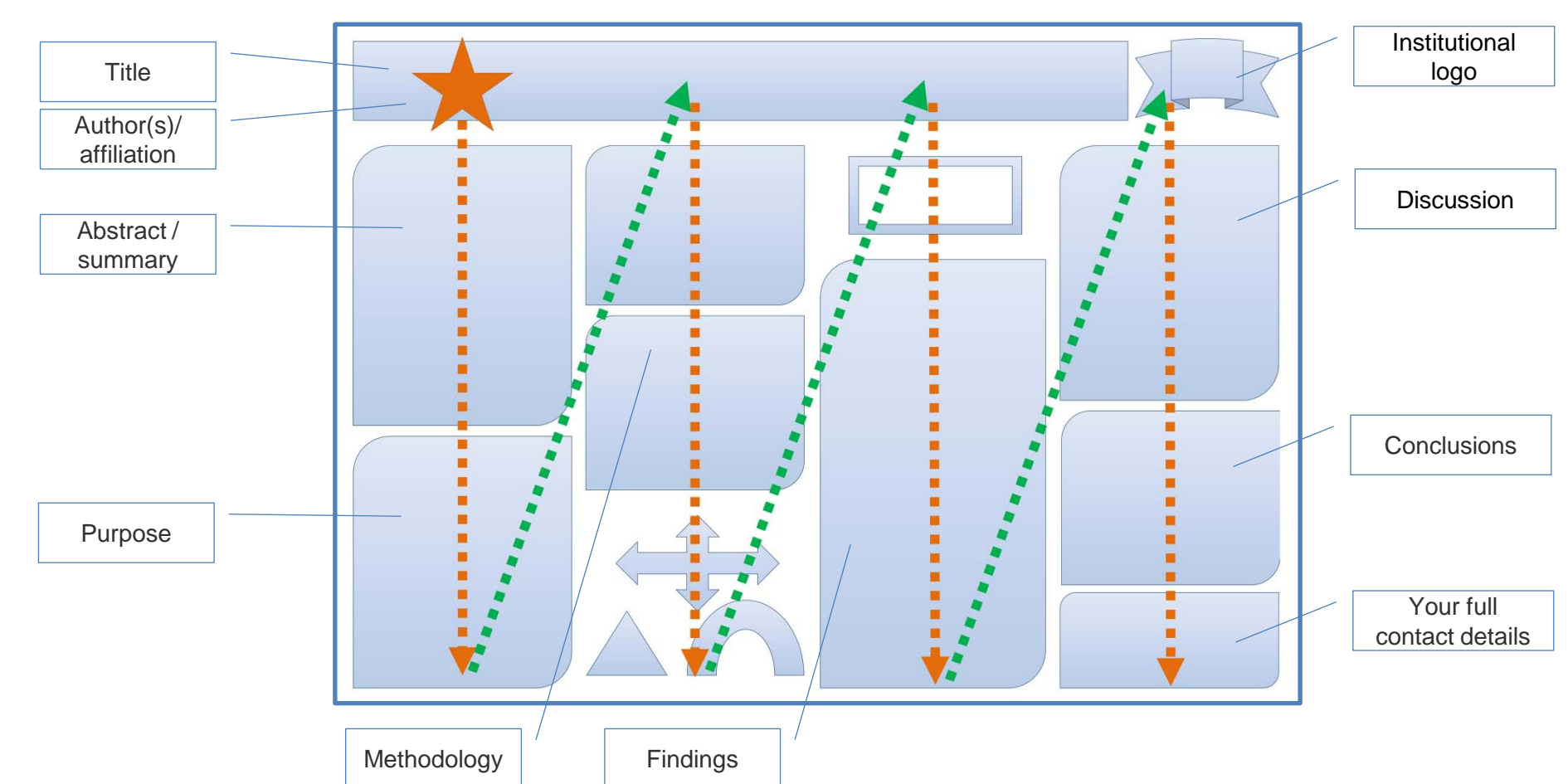
2) **Text** – must be easy to read from a distance
   - Type - limit to two types, preference for san serif styles (Arial, Helvetica)
   - Size - headings should be readable four metres away, sub headings - two metres away
     – 80-96 points for titles
     – 40-48 points for headings
     – 24-32 points for text
   - Styles and effects - limit the use of **bold**, colour, underline, *italics* and highlight

3) **Graphics** – limit use of clipart, photographs give a more professional look and use often what you can communicate in a picture, graph, table

4) **Colour** – know your colour wheel and combinations
   - Limit to a maximum two to three colours
   - Dark coloured background is tiring to read
   - Very bright combinations wears out the eye
   - Be careful with primary colours – attractive but distracting
   - Consider subtle, easy to read combinations
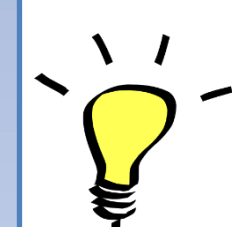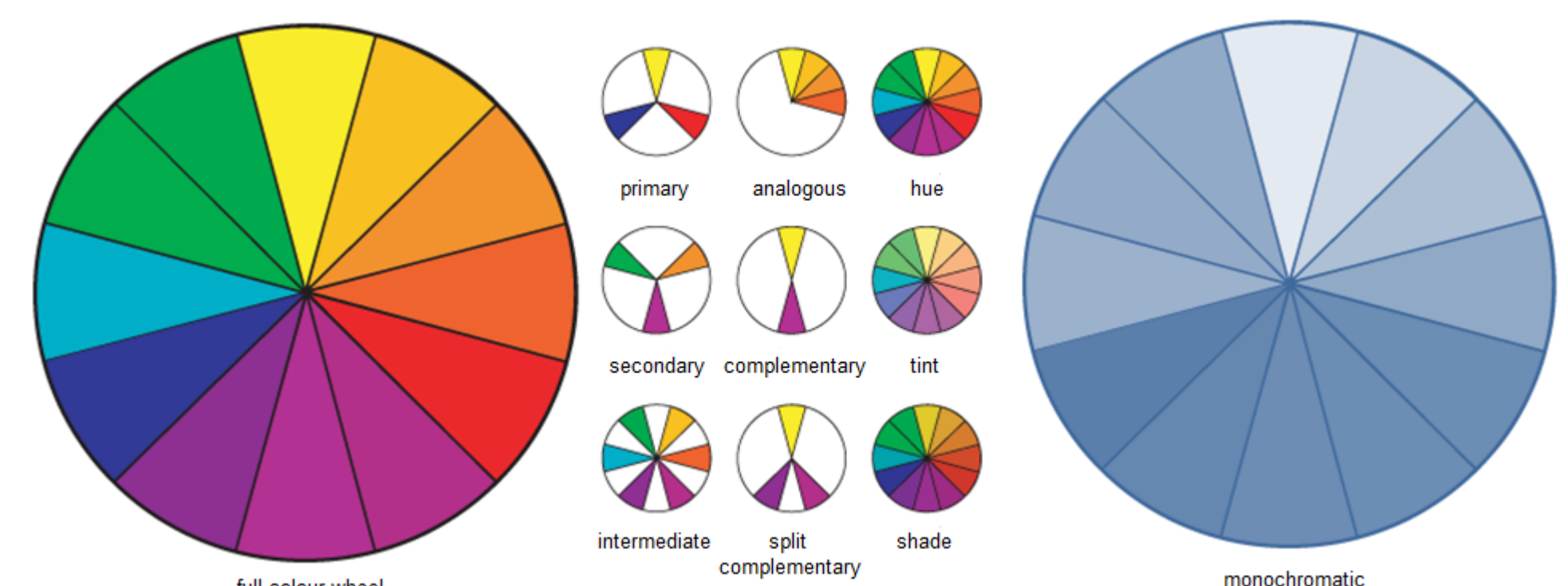
Preparation tip
- Consider the alternative when reviewing your work

Presentation

Poster presentations do not end with your poster. Consider you, your poster and the message your audience takes away as a whole package.
You and your poster
- Plan where to stand (do not cover your work)
- Prepare a short interesting spiel (elevator pitch)
- Plan how your present yourself on the day (remember to bathe, brush teeth and apply perfume)
What the audience takes away
- Business cards
- Prepare a small version of your poster in A4 or A5
- A clear visual summary of your message and a positive impression of you!

Example of poster/wardrobe coordination. Please note that his tie features teeth and tooth care products.

Photo courtesy (and copyright) Nicole Barker (aka 'pixieniki')
Source: http://www.swarthmore.edu/NatSci/cpurrin1/posteradvice.htm