Creating a Scholar to Scholar Poster: A Guide for Beginners
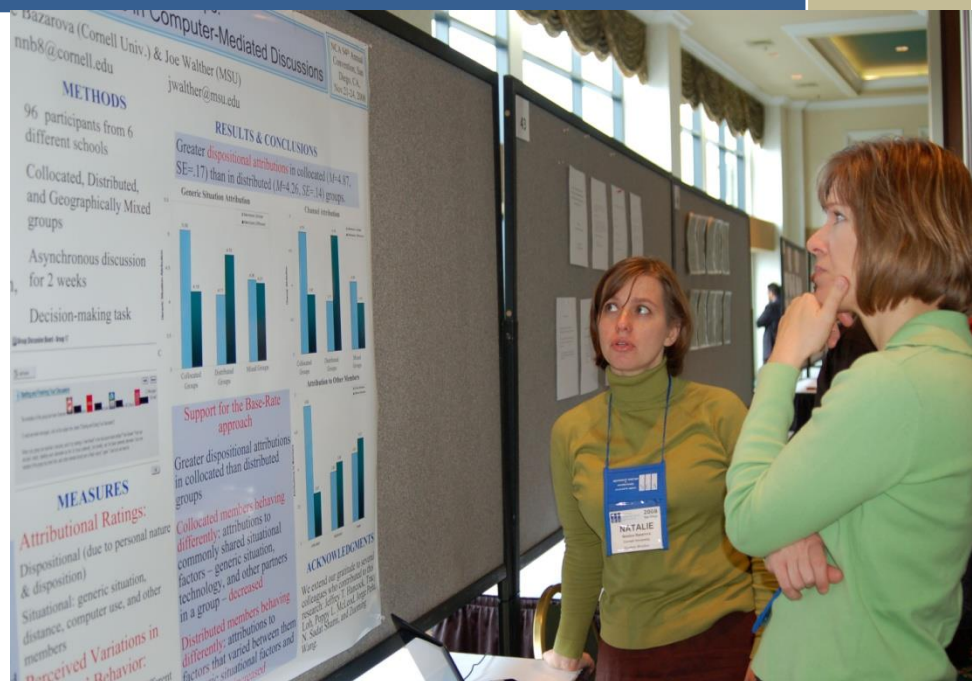
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What is Scholar to Scholar?

There are many different types of sessions at the NCA Annual Convention such as panel discussions, paper sessions, business meetings, and Scholar to Scholar (S2S) sessions. Each of these sessions serve different purposes and have different strengths and weaknesses. Panel discussions best foster discussion on broad topics and business meetings allow units and affiliates to conduct official business. However, those who desire to share their research with others in a more innovative and unconventional way should consider presenting in Scholar to Scholar sessions. Scholar to Scholar is an interactive presentation format in which participants display their work using creative posters, digital slides, and other media with the goal of engaging conversation with other scholars in attendance. Scholar to Scholar presentations consist of presenters standing and giving oral presentations with the help of graphic posters they've created in advance. Scholar to Scholar sessions will consist of Wandering Scholars, experts in the Communication field who will be walking by to examine posters and interact with the presenters. Most importantly, Wandering Scholars will provide feedback about presenters' work that may be beneficial to future research or publication opportunities. Scholar to Scholar sessions provide the opportunity for more informal discussion and feedback about your work. Posters for these sessions are large and contain less text that an oral paper. Most posters are on one page of paper. Some presenters create posters in pieces and assemble them at the conference. This can come in handy if you must travel a long distance to your conference as poster tubes can sometimes be tricky to handle. Scholar to Scholar presenters will be provided a 4 ft by 6 ft bulletin board and should aim to have their posters fit this space appropriately.

Why Scholar to Scholar?

There are several advantages to participating in Scholar to Scholar over a paper session:

- Sometimes, new presenters can be nervous about speaking in front of large groups of their peers. Scholar to Scholar can be less intimidating because they involve speaking one-on-one or to small groups rather than large audiences.

- Scholar to Scholar allows presenters to have more time with the audience. In a paper panel a presenter may only have time to answer one question, where with Scholar to Scholar a presenter has the potential to interact with numerous persons.

- Scholar to Scholar has the potential to showcase work that lends itself to visual presentation formats.

Getting Started

The poster format is the most common Scholar to Scholar presentation style. The first thing you want to do when starting to think about how to make your Scholar to Scholar poster is to decide what information you are going to include. If you were going to read a paper at the convention, you would want to prepare a presentation. However, poster presenters do not give formal presentations, but rather answer questions about their work so the poster itself must "speak" for the presenter. You don't want your audience to have to work to understand your poster; rather you want your poster to clearly and succinctly communicate with your audience. The most successful posters are those that are engaging, pretty, informative and easy to understand.

That being said, one of the big blunders of a new poster maker is to put too much text onto their poster. Think of your poster as a detailed outline of a paper you might give. Take advantage of the visual nature of the medium and include pictures, charts, figures, etc. and help your audience work through your poster in a logical manner.

A classic research poster generally has the following sections: Introduction, Literature Review, Methods, Results, Discussion and Conclusion. Also, you will want to include sections for brief acknowledgments and a works cited section. Of course, these are just suggestions. Your poster topic may not need these sections or may need different, additional sections. Be creative and take advantage of the visual medium of the poster. You will also want to include your name and affiliation.

Organize Your Poster

1. Think of your poster's content as if it were a written paper. What sections might you include? Introduction? Methods? Discussion? These are the sections of your poster. You should think about having approximately four to five double spaced, 20 point font pages of text total on your final poster.

2. Outline your poster first in a word processing program. This will become the text of your poster. Make sure the text is complete, spell-checked and free from grammatical errors.

What to Include on Your Poster

Once you have the text of your poster organized, it's time to think about what visual elements you might include on your poster. Most people include pictures and other visual elements on their poster. You will have a 4 foot by 6 foot bulletin board to pin or tape your poster up. Please keep in mind that posters should not be larger than the board provided. There is no particular limit to the number or kind of visual images to include on your poster, but remember that your poster will print very large. Be sure that you check any prospective image to see what its resolution is. Generally, 300 dpi is acceptable for poster printing, but be sure to check your image at 100% resolution to make sure there aren't visible pixels. Check with your own image editing software program to make sure it looks appropriate and then be sure to not enlarge the image once it is on your poster.

Designing the Poster

We recommend that before you design your poster on the computer, you pull out a sheet of paper and draw where you think each of your poster visual elements should go. This can be a good way to decide how much room you have for photos, text, maps, charts, etc. As you design your poster, there are several things you should keep in mind: Content, Clarity and Organization, Balance, The Rule of Thirds and Color and White Space. Each of these ideas will help you design the visual look of your poster.
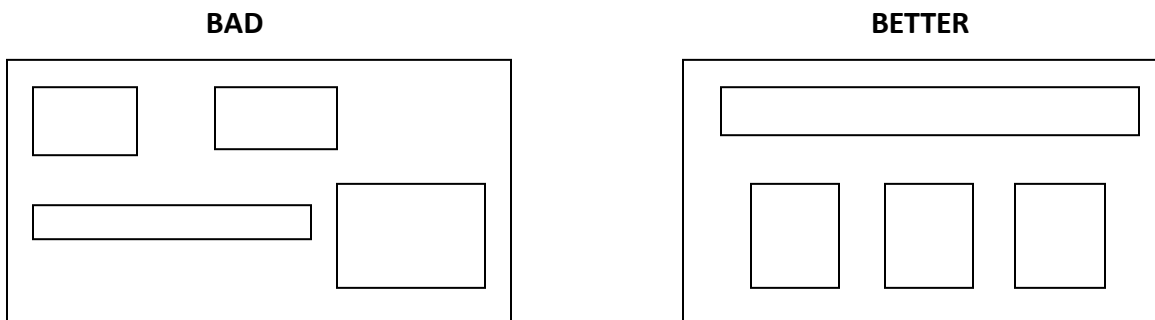
Content

Have you included all of the relevant information that will help a viewer understand what your research is about? Be sure you provide maps; pictures or figures that will help illustrate your main points. Posters are a creative medium and should therefore express the author's creativity. Remember, you're not presenting a paper so you should limit the amount of text on your poster and focus on the visual impact. You can always email interested persons a copy of a written paper if they are interested.

Clarity and Organization

Once you are sure that you have all of the content you need, be sure that your content is organized in a logical manner. This means that a person who comes to view your poster can quickly tell what your poster is about by glancing at it. This includes clearly labeling section headings and placing the title at the top. Always defer to keeping your poster clean and simple. Include only the main points and save your details for answering questions. Make sure that your conclusion summarizes your key findings in only a few sentences so you leave your audience with the biggest impact.
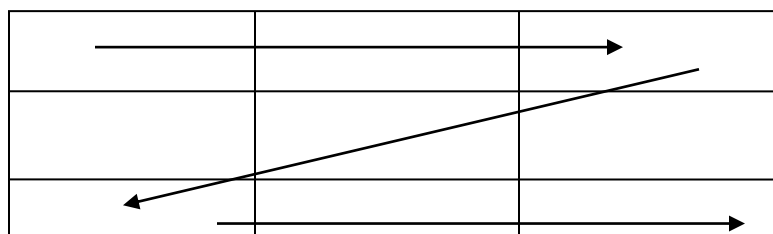
Balance

Balance refers to how your poster is "weighted." Will your poster be symmetrical? Asymmetrical? Radial? Good posters need not be symmetrical, in fact many good posters aren't. However, all good posters are well balanced meaning that the proportions of the poster are in harmony. If you put a large dark object on one side of your poster it might make your poster lopsided. You'll want to put something else of equal "weight" on the other side of your poster to create balance.

BAD	BETTER

Rule of Thirds

The "Rule of Thirds" is a design tool used by photographers and graphic artists. Many believe that visual images that follow this rule are more aesthetically pleasing. The rule states that visual images (your poster) can be divided into nine equal segments (three sections high and three sections wide. Your audience's eye should travel from the top to the bottom in a Z pattern. The most important parts of your poster should be located on this "Z" shape. Additionally, the points where the four lines intersect are considered to be the most powerful parts of your image. Try using Google to research Rule of Thirds for more information.

Color and White Space

The final two design tips we have to share are about the use of color and white space. As you are thinking about designing your poster, think first about what colors you want to use. Try to pick colors that work well together. PowerPoint can help you suggest colors schemes in the **Ask**

Panel. Try to use just these colors on your poster. Make sure that graphs, text, and the colors in your maps and photos also capitalize on these combinations. You don't want a green photograph in the middle of a poster that is red and black themed! Don't think that every inch of your poster needs to be filled with color or images though. White space refers to all of the spaces in your poster that aren't covered by text or other graphical elements. In other words, the white space is when you can see the background of your poster- even if it isn't white! This space is crucial to help the viewer stay focused on your main points. A novice poster maker might feel the need to fill every last inch of space with content, but resist the urge! A poster with white space looks professional and polished while a poster with little white space looks unorganized and clumsy.
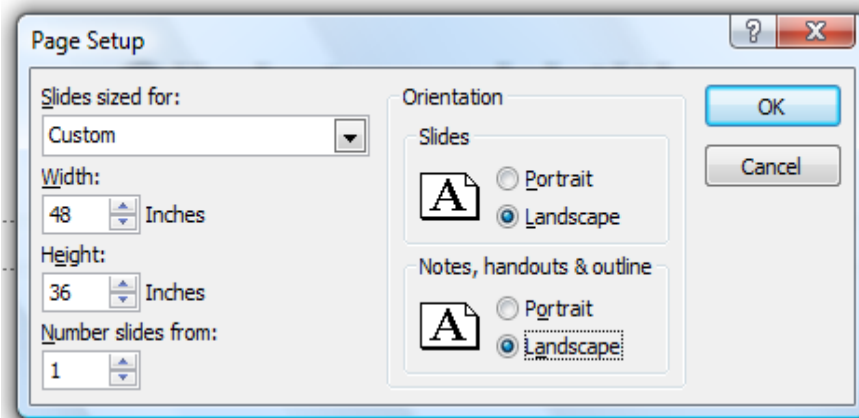
Which Software Program to Use?

There are many different software programs that can be used to create a poster such as Quark Express or Adobe Indesign. By our very un-scientific estimation the two most common are Microsoft Publisher and Microsoft PowerPoint. While Publisher is a little more powerful it is also much less common (for both poster authors and companies who print posters). Because of this, we generally recommend using Microsoft PowerPoint for new poster makers. There are several reasons we recommend PowerPoint:

• First, it is relatively easy to use.

• Second, most communication scholars have some level of skill and familiarity with PowerPoint so it is less intimidating.

• Finally, it is widely available to poster makers and printers meaning that once you spend all of your time to make your poster, you can easily have it printed at your choice of locations.

This guide will focus on using PowerPoint 2003 on a PC to make a poster but feel free to use any program you are comfortable with. Additionally, while this guide was accurate at the time of printing be sure to check with the version of PowerPoint you use as different versions can have slight changes from version to version or between different operating systems.

Getting Started with PowerPoint

Once you have opened the program, the first step is to decide what size poster you want to create. If you would like to create a poster that is a series of pieces of paper, just create a slide presentation and then print it as you would normally. Once you get to the convention, you can assemble it to the bulletin board provided by using tape or thumb tacks. This is especially useful if you are short on cash (printing large posters can be expensive) or if you are traveling a long distance (posters can be a hassle on a plane). However, most posters are printed on one continuous sheet of paper. The average poster is about 3 feet tall and 4 feet wide, however they can be as large as 5 feet by 7 feet. NCA will provide presenters with a 4 foot by 6 foot bulletin board. Presenters should aim to have their posters fit this space without going over. Also, when deciding how large of a poster to make, think about how much you want to spend. The larger the poster, the more expensive it will be to print and harder to transport. The default PowerPoint window size is designed to fit on a computer screen so you will need to change it. Open a new PowerPoint file and click on **File** and then **Page Setup**. Next, chose **Custom** from the pull down menu and then enter the size that you want your poster to be. Be sure to check with your poster printer for any size limitations and remember that NCA can only accommodate posters up to 4x6 feet. Your screen should look something like this with your own poster size values replacing these:

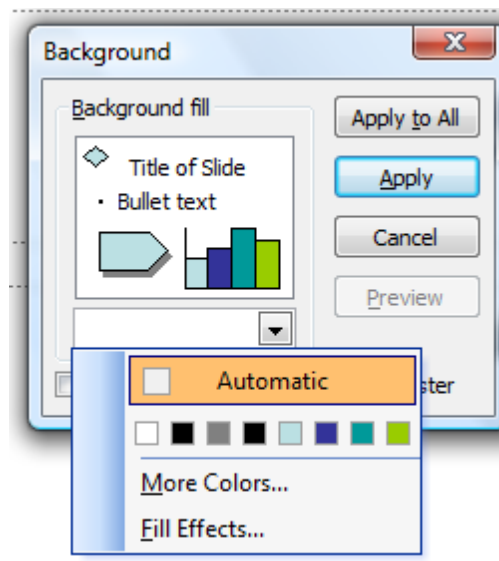

Now your PowerPoint file is ready to begin making your poster. Be sure to save your poster and then start creating.

Poster Template Tip

Try searching Google for keywords like: Academic Poster template PowerPoint to find templates to use.

Background

One of the first things you will probably want to do is think about the background of your poster. Many people like to have a simple white background and this is often a very good choice as it produces a poster that looks clean and focuses the viewer toward the data presented. However, some people like to have a color or photo be the background of their poster. This is very simply accomplished in PowerPoint. Click on the **Format** tab and then click on **Background**. A small window will open. Click on the down arrow and chose a color or "fill effect." Fill effects include things like gradients or using a photo as a background.

Working in PowerPoint

Most poster makers are fairly familiar with PowerPoint. For those of you who aren't, we suggest that you pick up a cheap copy of a how-to guide for PowerPoint as it will make your life easier. For those with experience making a presentation, making a poster is just like making a one-slide presentation for a 3 foot screen. This has both advantages and disadvantages. First, this means that you can use pre-made templates from Microsoft. Sometimes these can produce some very handsome posters, but be careful. These templates are designed to be shown on a computer screen which means they often have low resolution. Remember that while your poster might not look big on your screen, it will print big and may get pixilated. It is important to view your poster at 100% to make sure that your images are not going to get pixilated once it is printed.

Textboxes, Color, and Shading

Another thing to think about when you are working with your poster in PowerPoint is the use of textboxes. In PowerPoint, any shape that you draw using the drawing tool bar can be turned into a textbox by right clicking on the shape and then clicking on **Add Text**. You can then type directly into the shape. Additionally, you can add color to textboxes and also change the opacity of the box. It is generally easier to read dark text on a light background and this is true with your poster as well so focus on using white or lightly colored textboxes and black or dark text. In our experience changing the opacity of the textbox can lead to unexpected printing problems so use with caution. Coloring textboxes can be very useful especially when you have an image as your background.

Images

Obviously, you'll want to include images, maps etc. on your poster. You'll want to ensure that these are of an appropriate resolution and size. Also, if you include figures you will want to make sure they are against an appropriate background color. For example the photo of the Chinese vase on this page has a white background. If you were to put this image on a black background the box would stand out. This image might work better against a white background as seen below.

Also, it is often a nice design touch to put a thin border around images. You can do this easily by right clicking on the image and then **Format Picture** > **Color and Lines** and selecting a line color (black or grey) and a weight of 1pt.

Transparent Colors

Another way to remove the white box is to use the "Set Transparent Color" tool on the **Picture** toolbar. With a picture that you want to work with selected click on the tool then click on the color in the picture you want to "remove" (i.e. set transparent).

Text Fonts and Size

Fonts and lettering should be large enough so that people can read your poster's text from several feet away. This is not the time to use special fonts. Stick to basic fonts like Times New Roman and Arial. These will be most readable and will ensure that you have no font-related printing errors. We recommend the following font sizes, but the bigger the better is always the rule.

- The title should be at least 84 point

- Section headers should be at least 48 point

- Body text should be at least 24 point

Getting Your Poster Printed

Printing your poster can be one of the most stressful and costly parts of the entire process. Plan ahead and leave yourself plenty of time; while you can get your poster printed at the closest Kinkos to the convention hotel this will often be much more costly than printing your poster ahead of time. Even with Kinkos you will need 24 to 48 hours to print your poster as many sites do not have printers that print as large as you will need. Many printers require you to submit your poster as a PDF (portable document file format). For some this is easy; if you have Mac OS X or Adobe Professional you can turn your poster into a PDF right from the print menu (just

follow instructions for the program you are using). If you don't have either of these options at hand, don't worry. There are free PDF makers available online such as the CutePDF Writer available at www.cutepdf.com. Be sure to review your PDF to verify that there were no errors in conversion. Unless cost is not an issue for you, be sure to plan ahead and save money on poster printing. First of all, know the dimensions of your poster: size matters as many printers can only print up to a certain size, which may be too small for your poster. Also, you will be quoted a price by the square foot, so be ready to do some math to find out the total cost. Many schools offer poster printing services at lower prices than print shops. Ask around on campus, but good places to find on-campus printing services are your computer store, engineering department or biology department (really any "science" department may have printing services as poster presentations are the standard in those disciplines). Check out websites, many offer cheaper prices, but require a few weeks notice. Don't be afraid to call your local print shops as they are always happy to help and may even be able to give you a great price. Finally, if your printer offers to let you see a proof before printing, be sure to do so; this can let you catch any mistakes in printing before you incur the cost of printing a large poster.

Final Poster Points

1. Keep your poster simple and concise. Just because you know how to do something complex doesn't mean you should! White space is your friend.

2. Don't make complex charts or 3D graphs as they can often be hard to read. Use them only when it helps you interpret data.

3. Limit your poster to just the most informative and interesting aspects of your work.

4. Use color and other visual tools effectively. Choose a color scheme and visual style and stick with it.

5. Spell Check, Grammar Check, and Proofread.

6. Save. Then save again. Then save it to a different place. You don't want to work for hours and then have your computer shut down unexpectedly.

At the Convention

Once you get to the convention, scope out the space set aside for Scholar to Scholar. It will generally be a large room. It is best to explore the Scholar to Scholar area and locate your assigned bulletin board before the day of your own session so you won't feel rushed. Plan to set up your poster about 20 minutes before the start of your session.

Many people will walk by your poster during the session. Sometimes people will walk right by your poster. Other times they will stop and read your poster. Some people will ask you questions about your poster or findings. The vast majority of these people will be supportive and friendly so don't feel worried. Be prepared with a one sentence description of your poster to share with people who stop. Don't say things like "this graph shows our main finding" but instead you might offer something like: "We spent six months in the field and found that X was a major factor in Y." People will then engage you more or move on. If you have new people stop by, it is most polite to finish with the first person before moving on to the new arrival. Sometimes, people might ask for a copy of your poster. You can shrink your poster down to 11x17 inches or 8.5x11 inches in PowerPoint and have it printed on smaller paper at a copy center. You can hand out these copies. If you'd rather not do this, you can always email the individual a copy of the file. At the end of your session, take down your poster and be sure to collect all your materials and belongings. It is always best to leave the space cleaner than you found it. Pick up any stray cups or paper that is scattered around and dispose of them properly.

What Will NCA Provide?

- A bulletin board with a surface area of 4x6 feet.

- A table for a laptop and/or other materials

What Will NCA *Not* Provide:

- Push pins, tape, markers or any other supplies

- No audiovisual equipment for S2S presentations

Tips on Presenting

It is a good idea to carry basic business cards that have your name, affiliation and email address on them. There are several websites that offer free business cards which have their business logo on the back. Check out companies such as www.vistaprint.com online for more information.

• Remember to go to the restroom ahead of time and bring a water bottle with you.

• Think of your audience members as prospective employers. The person who stops by your poster today might be on your hiring committee later.

• While this should hopefully go without saying: dress appropriately (no need for a suit, but a tee shirt isn't right either). Aim to dress in business casual attire.

Poster Making References

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