Identity & Authenticity
Creating, Preserving & Transmitting Identities
Across Time & Place

A Symposium of
The Research Group on Manuscript Evidence
Friday & Saturday
22–23 March 2013
McComrick 106
Princeton University

Designing Academic Posters

Academic posters are a sales pitch for a talk, session, or symposium. Their job is to attract the right people to attend. As with other genres, they are competing with all the other attractions on display. More than other genres, they demand clarity and ‘truth in advertising’. Quality, not Quantity, of the audience, should be the goal. Marketing-style posters to attract maximum revenue are a different genre.

The layout needs to address three key goals:
1. Catch the attention of the passer-by
2. Provide a quick ‘go/no-go’ decision
3. Communicate accurately the time, place and other details.

Do’s and Don’t’s

Don’t use colored stock. It reduces print contrast so text and images appear muted and don’t stand out. It also distorts any true white areas in images.

Don’t use a faint image as an all-over background. It merges with the lettering and makes the text harder to read. It also devalues the image.

Don’t use initials clipped from manuscripts as part of the text. It is not obvious that they are supposed to be read as part of a word, and they are usually harder to recognize than a conventional typeface. This is especially true if the initial occupies a significantly larger portion of the poster than the line to which it is supposed to belong.

Do use images that are relevant to the context – you wouldn’t normally illustrate a talk about London Bridge with a picture of the Eiffel Tower, so don’t use irrelevant pictures simply because they are attractive or well-known. Choosing irrelevant images will confuse the reader, or give the impression that the talks are being otherwise misrepresented on the poster.

If the talks are about texts, use texts for the images. Ideally pick images in the range of languages, scripts, and formats that will be covered by the talks.

One large image will attract the eye better than a collection of postage stamps. But if the diversity of the material is a key element of the talks, try to illustrate the range.

Never overlap images. Let each stand for itself.

Target the right audience with clues on the poster. If a talk is going to be given in French, or German, for example, quote the title in that language.

The title may not be the most important piece of information on the poster, but it’s what people look for first, so set it big. But don’t let it crowd out the rest of the text.

Use white-space effectively to group information into digestible units. Don’t split related information between blocks.

The poster above was designed for a two-day symposium which covered a wide range of topics surrounding the ideas of ‘Identity’ and ‘Authenticity’. With seventeen talks scheduled, listing the full program would not be appropriate, so the images were chosen to indicate the range, including seals, seal-matrices, manuscripts, and documents of varying types and languages. The date-and-time was kept at the top of the poster near to the title and organization. The sponsors were placed with the images, where they would have high visibility, yet be separate from the organizational details. At the bottom of the page, also with the images, are the acknowledgements for permission to use the images.

These observations and directions conform with the principles which guide the approach of the Research Group on Manuscript Evidence to its publications. Foremost is the principle that form and content must be appropriate for form and audience, as set forth in its Style Manifesto:

http://manuscriptevidence.org/style-manifesto/.
Think about eye-traversal, which usually means left-to-right, top-to-bottom. So the order should be:

1. Affiliation of the organization producing the talk
2. Title
3. Subtitle
4. Short description of the topic or approach
5. People (speakers and sponsors)
6. Place and Time
7. Other information (URL, RSVP, Parking, copyright and permission, etc.)

Don’t include abstracts or biographies. That is too much detail for a simple decision. Do list speaker names and affiliations. If a talk is aimed at students or the general public, then say so. Invite, but don’t exclude.

On the left is an example of a poster for a one-day colloquium. The poster does not use any images, since it has to carry a lot of textual information. The title alone does not convey the nature of the content of the event. The poster also lists the speakers and the times of their talks, to allow a potential attendee to assess timing and participation. Also important is to inform that the talk is free, and open to the public.

Above is a poster for a single session at the Kalamazoo Congress. The congress itself is accompanied by a full program booklet giving speaker details and abstracts, so the main reference on the poster is to the time and place, and the session number in the program. The focus for the people is on the details participating in the session, again for the quick ‘attend or not’ decision. In this example, the image was chosen to mimic the session title, with three cobra heads representing (possibly) ‘good’, ‘bad’, and ‘ugly’ rulers. In competition with all the other sessions, and session posters, a large eye-catching image and title are essential.