

Some dos and don'ts for posters and presentations

If you have your eye on the prizes to be won for posters and talks at the Challenger Society Anniversary Conference, here are some tips. The poster prize honours Cath Allen, a researcher in fluid dynamics at the University of Lancaster, who died in 1991. The Challenger Society introduced the prize to combat the idea that contributing to a conference poster session is a second best alternative to delivering a paper, even though a poster needs to be at least as well thought-out as a talk. The prize for the best talk honours Norman Heaps, a shelf-sea modeller who died in 1986. He was a particularly clear speaker, with an enthusiastic, lively and entertaining way of delivering a talk.

The Cath Allen Poster Prize

- A poster is a chance to use your skill in presentation of data, in layout, and in distilling the essence of your message. **It is not an abbreviated paper.**
- **A poster needs to be attractive**, with an interesting title that is visible from a distance. If a poster doesn't draw attention to itself, it could be overlooked, and all the work put into it could be wasted.
- **A poster needs to be easily readable**, and not just by someone standing really close to it. For the main text, take care to choose a clear type-face at sensible point size. Avoid long complex sentences.
- **Avoid large slabs of text** and overlong line-lengths; the optimal line-length for readability is considered to be 50–65 characters per line, including spaces. For consistent spacing between words, use unjustified text.
- **Ensure your diagrams are large enough** to be seen clearly, and that the line weights of graphs etc. aren't too spindly.
- **Ensure that you have explained your symbols and acronyms**, and have put scales on figures if necessary.
- **Try not to have more than about five figures** (diagrams and photos). Remember that a well-chosen picture can be worth a thousand words.
- **Diagrams need to be close to the text** that relates to them, **or very easily found**.
- **Make use of colour** to enliven the poster and help direct the reader where to look.
- **Don't be tempted into over-complicating the appearance of the poster**, and obscuring your message.
- **Try to convey why your research is so exciting.**
- **Be there by your poster to answer questions.**

The Norman Heaps Prize

- **Time your talk beforehand.** There is nothing more upsetting than having to leave the podium without getting to your conclusion.
- **Beware of overload.** It's not advisable to have more than about half-a-dozen pieces of 'hard' information (diagrams, maps, tables) per 15 mins of presentation. **That's still only 2.5. minutes per picture.** (This doesn't preclude any scene-setting photos.)
- Don't forget that **your time slot includes 2–3 minutes for questions.**
- Everyone uses their Powerpoint slides as memory prompts, but **try not to find yourself just reading from them or you will lose spontaneity.**
- In particular, reading through introductory slides that show the title, the aims, methods, results and even conclusions, takes up valuable time and isn't necessary, as the Chair will have already introduced you, and the audience has the compilation of abstracts. **If you are determined to have an introductory slide, make it brief and interesting.**
- Your results may be fascinating, but that's irrelevant if they can't be read from further back than the first two rows. **Graphs and diagrams are easier for an audience to take in than tables.** If you do use tables, highlight the numbers you are talking about.
- **Make use of colour** to enliven your graphics and help convey your storyline.
- **Use variety – switch between text, diagrams and photos.** If you use visuals from a number of sources, ensure that they use the same conventions for symbols etc.
- **Remember who your audience are.** Challenger conferences are attended by marine scientists from all disciplines, each with their own vocabulary, so try to explain any specialist terms so that everyone can follow your talk.
- **Try to convey why your research is so exciting.**