

Local Sections & Divisions

PRESENTING A POSTER AT THE AACC ANNUAL MEETING, PART I: SUBMITTING AN ABSTRACT

A scientific abstract is a brief summary of a scientific investigation. Two variants exist, the abstract at the beginning of a scientific paper and an abstract of a poster or talk to be given at a scientific meeting. This is about the second kind. When published in the meeting program, these abstracts are intended as a preview, allowing one to make an informed decision to visit the poster or attend the presentation. The abstract is also often used to determine which posters or talks will be presented at the meeting. Meeting organizers will accept only those investigations that appear to be well done and of interest to attendees, based on review of the abstract. Meeting abstracts accepted for presentation at the AACC Annual Meeting will appear in *Clinical Chemistry*. The audience that reads these abstracts is considerably larger than the audience that will visit the poster. This allows your study to become more widely known. Abstracts in journals can also be cited as references. The ability to write a good abstract can be quite important to the development of your professional reputation.

The first (and hardest) step in submitting an abstract is to carry out a meaningful investigation of a hypothesis or question. You do not need to have completed the investigation at the time you write the abstract, but you should have done enough to have some results that will be of interest to others. Don't try to write up a project you have only just begun, but expect to have results by the time of the meeting. An abstract that says in effect "results will be presented at the meeting" will not be accepted. Without some results, the referees will have no way of knowing how interesting your findings are, nor can they have confidence that you will have results by meeting time. Also, people who take time to read your abstract and find no results will feel gypped.

The next step is to find out the submission requirements for the meeting at which you wish to present your work. These requirements are usually described in the "Call for Abstracts." The AACC has gone to an on-line abstract submission process and no longer automatically distributes a printed Call for Abstracts, but you can request one be sent to you by calling the customer service department at 800-892-1400. For online instructions, [click here](#).

Abstract instructions are usually quite explicit. Read and follow them. Failure to do so may result in automatic disqualification of your abstract. Pay special attention to the length limitations. Note whether the submission deadline is the date postmarked or the date of receipt. (The AACC requires that the abstract be postmarked by Jan. 12, 2000.) Many organizations, including the AACC, allow or require abstracts to be submitted as a word processing file, either on a diskette or electronically.

Abstracts can be written in structured and unstructured formats. Abstracts for articles in the *New England Journal of Medicine* are structured. They follow the typical format of a scientific article, with labeled sections for Background, Methods, Results and Conclusions. Abstracts submitted for the AACC Annual Meeting do not require a specific structure, but should generally follow the latter format, without the labels. Methods and results can often be blended to keep the abstract short.

An unstructured abstract allows more artistic license. The result can be an abstract that is both more concise and more interesting than a formally structured one. The first 1-2 sentences should define the question that the study will address and why it is important. Make the first sentence one that will get the reader's attention (Remember, your accepted abstract will become an advertisement to induce the reader to visit your poster at

the meeting.) The general approach to answering the question can usually be covered in one sentence. The results description should be the largest piece of the abstract, with its size determined by the length limitations. It can also include mention of specific methods used to get the results, as appropriate. Avoid generalities, and try to get as much hard data (e.g., numbers) into this section as you can. The importance of this becomes clear when you realize that the abstract will be the only thing a large number of people will see. (Note that for certain types of studies, the AACC abstract instructions require some explicit pieces of data to be included as validation.) Finish with 1-2 sentences of conclusion. The conclusion (or last sentence) is often the first thing to be read after the title. Like the opening sentence, it should be an attention getter.

For examples of accepted abstracts, see the supplement to the June 1999 issue of Clinical Chemistry. The POCT abstracts begin on page A1. You can also view the [1999 abstracts on line](#). While all of these abstracts were good enough to be accepted for presentation, all are not equally well done. Reading a number of these is a good way to get a feel for what makes a good abstract.

PRESENTING A POSTER AT A SCIENTIFIC MEETING, PART II

Presenting a poster at a meeting is usually by invitation only. **Part I** of this series described the preparation and submission of an abstract of your presentation. If the investigation described in your abstract is well done and relevant to the objectives of the meeting, you will be invited to present your results in the form of a poster. This part of the series describes the basic principles for producing a poster that will present your results effectively and will encourage attendees to read your poster and to seek you out during the scheduled time when you will "attend" the poster. Presenting posters is an excellent way to attain professional visibility among your colleagues. A good poster can lead to invitations to collaborate, to give talks and even to job offers.

General design: Plan the poster for the space available. The most common size is 4' x 8'. Sketching out the basic elements in miniature can help in the overall design. One effective design approach is to imagine the poster divided into four "columns" of equal size. Make it visually interesting and attractive, both in the individual elements and in the overall impression. (While many people review the abstracts in the program book in advance to decide which posters they will visit, many others simply roam the poster area, scanning all the posters and stopping for those that look interesting.) The basic elements of a poster should include a Title Banner, an Abstract, a Body (which should consist primarily of visual items and may have subelements) and Conclusions. Take into account any special requirements that may be requested.

Title Banner: This gives:

- **The Title of the Poster**
- The Author(s)
- *The institutional affiliation(s).*

The banner may be provided for you; if it is, it will usually be placed on your poster board prior to your session. More often, you will need to create your own. This is best done by computer. Use letters of at least 48 points for title (or the largest font available) and progressively smaller fonts for the rest. Wide banners that run along the top of the poster are easiest to read. These can be printed on a single long strip of paper at a copy shop. They can also be printed in segments on standard paper that is cut and taped together to create the banner.

Abstract: This summarizes your poster and should occupy no more than 1 page (shorter is better). It may be the abstract that appears in the program book. It can also be updated to include information obtained since the original abstract was submitted. See [Part I](#) of this series for more information on preparing abstracts.

Body: Many approaches are possible for this. An emphasis should be placed on the "Results" of your investigation, presented in visually oriented formats: Pictures, figures, tables. Written material should be limited to that needed to place the visuals in context and explain their significance. This explanatory material can be in the form of text, figure legends, or "headlines". Try to avoid a poster that is simply a scientific article that has been tacked to a board, rather than published in a journal. Posters are most effective at achieving the goal of promoting scientific dialogue when they serve to catalyze real discussions between the author and the viewers, rather than relying on a text "Discussion" section. If a significant amount of text is unavoidable, make sure that the font is large enough (14-point is the absolute minimum; 18-point or larger is recommended), and plan on having "handouts" (see below). Visual items (graphs, tables, photos) that convey the most important idea of the poster should be placed in the upper central area of the poster, just below the title banner. This results in a visually attractive poster that will convey your "main message" to the greatest number of people.

Conclusions:

1. Provide 1-5 conclusions
2. Make them succinct
3. Place them in numbered or ■ bullet format

Conclusions are often the first thing read on a poster. Be sure they can be understood by someone who has not looked at the rest of the poster.

Practical Details: Posters are usually mounted on a large corkboard, typically 4' by 8'. Pushpins are usually used to mount the items. These may be provided, or you may need to bring your own. The nicest posters are printed on a large single piece of paper on which all of the elements are printed. The poster is laid out on a computer and printed from a file using a special printer. This can be done by some copy shops; if you work in an academic center, or large company, the service may be available in-house. Advantages of this approach: It looks very professional. The poster can be conveniently carried to the meeting in a large mailing tube. Miniature versions can be printed up and used as handouts (make sure your fonts are large enough to be legible in the handout--they will then be easily read on the poster as well.) Disadvantages: This is usually quite expensive.

The alternative is to do what everyone did not too long ago: Use rubber cement or double-sticky tape to mount items on thin colored cardboard ("railroad board") or construction paper. This provides contrast, stiffness and room for pushpins. You can have a separate backing for each item, or put several items on a single piece. The overall design is controlled by where you mount the individual pieces. Provided your individual items are not too large, you can conveniently carry your disassembled poster in a large manila envelope. Use a computer with a laser printer to prepare your written material, if possible. You will need a variety of font sizes for best effect. Lower case letters are larger in sans serif fonts like Helvetica and Arial and are legible at a greater distance for a given font size. However, serif fonts are easier to read where there is dense text. Try to use fonts 18 points or larger. Use 0.5 or 0.75 inch margins if necessary to allow the use of a larger font.

Handouts: Relatively few people take extensive notes during poster sessions. Providing a handout can allow participants to review your findings after they return home. The most useful handouts are the poster in miniature. This is easily done when the entire poster can be printed as a single document at various

magnifications. If you have put your poster on standard 8.5" x 11" sheets, you can use a photocopier to create a compact version: Reduce two side by side sheets in portrait format by 65% to get a single sheet in landscape format. Stack two of these and reduce again to get four poster pages on a single sheet. If you used adequately large fonts for your poster, these will be quite legible.

Be sure to put contact information on your handout. Bring a number of business cards with you as well. A major goal of posters is to allow you to get to know other scientists who share your interests. Many collaborations have begun with the exchange of business cards. Business cards are also used to request a copy of your poster (if your handouts run out, or you didn't have any to begin with.) This is done by leaving a business card, usually in the envelope with the extra pushpins.