" Gradually, some of the traditional maladies of Chilean 'pioneer' archaeology – naive descriptive archaeology, excessive and massive digs at cemeteries, uncontextualized museum exhibits – have faded away. "

*Cultura Chinchorro
ca.6500BP*

A Poster Primer:
A Few Tips for Planning Your Poster Session

Fraser D. Neiman

Last year's SAA Annual Meeting in St. Louis featured roughly 1200 papers given in up to 11 concurrent sessions, running from 7:30 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. over the course of four days. The sheer number of presentations has far outstripped the ability of the traditional slide-talk format to meet the needs of both presenters and their audiences. The large number of concurrent sessions, combined with the inevitable difficulties in keeping papers to their scheduled times, makes hearing the papers that interest you a Herculean task, with large opportunity costs for even the most energetic and calculating session hopper. Nor is the lot of paper giver a happy one. Multiple concurrent sessions and early morning and evening venues help insure that you read your paper to a small clique of close friends and colleagues who are already familiar with your work. As a result, giving a paper is unlikely to widen the circle of colleagues who might benefit from hearing what you have to say, and you are unlikely to get any novel, helpful feedback simply because there are so few people there to give it.

Under these circumstances, it is no surprise that many SAA members are opting to forgo the paper chase and present their work in an alternative format: the poster session. Doing a poster offers you precisely the benefits that papers do not: the opportunity to reach a large number of people and benefit from their reactions to your work. You are likely to have interesting conversations from which you can learn, make new friends, and perhaps even establish fruitful collaborations.

A poster is a vigorous hybrid of scholarly paper and museum exhibit. Like a paper, a poster is built around an argument. Like an exhibit, a poster is primarily a visual experience. The key to building a successful poster is to present a good argument in primarily visual terms. Since archaeologists know how to argue, my offering here is limited to raising some of the issues to consider when translating an argument into a visually effective poster.

Layering Information

Plan your poster by recognizing your audience has different levels of interest. You can maximize the number of people you reach by taking advantage of a principle well known in the world of museum exhibits: organize your presentation so that it simultaneously makes sense when read at multiple levels of detail. Your audience can be divided into three groups and the components of your presentation should be layered accordingly. Most of the people strolling past your poster will have little or no prior knowledge in your area of expertise. By glancing at the poster title and main section headings, they should be able to get a good idea of what it is about and whether they want to learn more. At the next level are individuals who have some prior interest with the subject matter of your poster. Your title and section heads will alert these people that yours is a poster of more than passing interest. They will probably spend some time with your graphics, scanning not only their titles, but the explanatory captions as well. It should be possible to glean most of the argument from these components of your presentation. Finally, there are the dedicated few who are actively engaged in research on your topic. A few of them — this would have been your audience had you given a talk — can be counted on to peruse not only your graphics and their captions, but also the text that provides the transitions between them. Obviously, you want to construct your poster so that people who start as members of the first group become members of the second and those in the second move onto the third. You can raise the transition probabilities by making your poster as viewer-friendly as you can.

Getting Started

Rely on graphics as much as possible to tell your story. If you offer your audience a poster that is mostly text, most of it will quickly stray elsewhere. One way to maximize graphical content is to begin planning your poster as list of graphs, drawings, and photos and draft captions for them. Experiment to see how much of your argument can be conveyed in graphics and captions alone. Then group the graphics into sections and write the section headings that highlight their content. Finally, fill any missing transitions with extra text.

Once you have an initial draft of the text, you should print it using the fonts and page format that you have chosen for your poster. Create a mockup on a convenient floor or wall by arranging the text and sketches of the graphics you are considering as they will appear on your poster. On the first try, you will probably discover that you have over twice the amount of text that will physically fit in the allotted space (usually 4 by 8 feet). Do not succumb to the temptation to use a smaller font size. Edit with no mercy. You can expect to spend considerable time in front of your rough mockup, refining ideas for graphics and pairing text down to size. To avoid wasted effort, it is important that you begin working on your mockup as early in the design process as possible.

Graphics

Given the importance of the graphical element, you will want to take special care that your graphics are both easy to interpret and data-rich. Edward Tufte's two volumes, *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information* (Graphics Press, 1983) and *Envisioning Information* (Graphics Press, 1990) offer valuable guidance on this topic. Among Tufte's most important contributions to graphic excellence is the notion of data-ink ratio. The data-ink ratio is the proportion of non-redundant ink in a graphic that is devoted to the portrayal of variation in the numbers represented. Excellent graphics have high data-ink ratios. While the increasingly powerful graphical capabilities of a variety of software packages make the preparation of slick graphics easy, their default output often minimizes the data-ink ratio by adding superfluous three-dimensional effects, shading, gridded backgrounds, and vibrating fill patterns. Similar principles should guide the use of color in graphics: avoid color variation that does not help convey information. All these effects, while superficially flashy, merely make it more difficult for the viewer to extract the information you want to convey in your poster.

Excellent graphics are data-rich. Your graphics should portray as much of the detail in the underlying data matrix as clarity allows. For example, if you want to compare sherd thickness in a suite of ceramic assemblages, give some thought to how you might portray not just a summary measures like means and standard deviations, but shapes of frequency distribution or perhaps even individual data values. Data richness lends credibility to graphics. It also offers openings for your audience to respond to your presentation. Data poverty not only provides very little basis for dialogue, but may leave the viewer wondering about the quality and quantity of your data.

Organizational Cues

Because you are presenting an argument, you need to offer your viewer clear visual cues about where to begin and how to proceed. A simple way to way to indicate order is to number the section headings. Organizing the text so that it reads from top to bottom in columns, with the columns ordered from left to right, fits the a priori expectations of most viewers. It also means that people can read your poster in a single pass from left to right, without backtracking and bumping into one another.

Judicious use of different font sizes and styles, keyed to the layers of your presentation, can also help your audience along. The title of your poster should be legible from 30-40 feet. This requires a 140-280 point font. Your name and affiliation should also be prominently displayed. Section heads should be printed no smaller than 36 points to make them easily legible from 10 or 15 feet. Bold or italic styles can help set off main section heads and graphics titles. The body of your poster's text, the captions and transitions, should be printed no smaller than 18 points in a serif type face so they can be read from 3-4 feet. Serif faces (e.g. Times, Palatino, Century School Book) are much easier to read than sans-serif faces (Helvetica).

Color can also be used to help enhance the viewer's experience. Print text and graphics on plain or lightly tinted paper. Cut the paper into paragraph-sized blocks and arrange them on a contrasting, colored background. This breaks up your presentation into pieces that will appear less intimidating and more accessible to your audience. The spatial arrangement of the text and graphics blocks should parallel the structure of your argument. For example, you might try spacing text and graphics blocks more closely within sections. In a similar vein, using contrastingly tinted paper for graphics and their explanatory captions on the one hand and ancillary text on the other suggests to the viewer which parts of your story should be taken in together. Choose an unobtrusive background color on which to mount the graphics and text blocks (e.g. a low-value blue, gray, or green). A bright (e.g. yellow) background is painful to look at, especially for viewers who were up late the night before, and distracts the eye from the content of your presentation.

Assembly

There are two approaches to assembling the final product. You can do it at the meeting by covering the bulletin board with a paper background and then pinning your text and graphics blocks to it. An alternative, which can result in a more polished presentation and quicker on-site setup, is to assemble the poster at home and transport it to the meeting in pieces. The key to this approach is to use matte board, available in a wide variety of colors at any art supply store, as your background material. Glue graphics and text blocks to the matte board with artist's spray adhesive. If you go this route make sure to print graphics and text on a heavy-weight paper so that the glue does not spot through. Using a utility knife and a strait edge, cut the matte board into transportable pieces. By taping adjacent pairs together and then folding them along the taped joint, you can reduce the number of pieces you have to transport and then assemble at the meeting. Matte board makes possible a more durable poster that is less likely to be damaged in transit and can easily be displayed again.

Creating a poster is a challenging experience. The level of time and effort required to produce a good poster far exceeds that required to compose a 20-minute talk and make the accompanying slides. However, the payoff is worth it. In opting to present a poster instead of a traditional paper, you are joining a rapidly growing group of archaeologists who are frustrated with reading a paper to a dark, unresponsive room and attracted by the prospect of having a real conversation with their colleagues. These twin factors have already made posters the primary presentation format in the biological and physical sciences. They guarantee that posters will very soon enjoy the same popularity in archaeology. ◼

Fraser D. Neiman is currently visiting lecturer at the Department of Anthropology at Yale.