

Writing a professional poster abstract

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There is more to your poster abstract than getting your head of department to agree to letting you attend Focus. The science must be right and sufficiently significant to be accepted by the Scientific Organising Committee but the abstract must also stand up on its own as a scientific publication. We all put a huge amount of effort in producing a colourful, eye-catching and readable poster and then coping with the vagaries of our Medical Illustration department or local print shop. But the poster itself is a very temporary phenomenon, displayed for a day at Focus and then hopefully for a year or so in the laboratory corridor, before being consigned to a bundle in the corner somewhere. The abstract is published in a leading journal, could come up on a literature search and be read around the world, and it is the abstract reference that goes on your CV.

A witty, punchy title will grab the attention of other conference delegates. A more descriptive title containing your key words will increase the chances that it is found on a literature search, raising the profile of your research work.

Don't leave writing the abstract until the last minute. Make sure you have plenty of time to write and refine it. Write it in Word and check out all the spelling and grammar suggestions it comes up with. Get someone whose writing style and command of grammar you respect to proof-read a hard-copy for you and ensure that all of your co-authors have a chance to read it and comment. Don't forget to proof-read the title, authors and addresses too. Check that you have all the initials of your co-authors.

As Editor of Proceedings I have noticed some common style mistakes. Most test names are not proper nouns and should not be capitalised. Likewise only proprietary names of drugs should be capitalised, for example it is Epilim and valproate. Instrument and manufacturers' names, however, are proper nouns and it is worth checking the spelling including capital letters, spaces and hyphens. Any number at the beginning of a sentence must be in words. Numerals do save on word count so try and reword the sentence, for example 'Of 35 apples, 5 were bad'. Non-standard abbreviations are another useful device to save words but they should always be defined. There is no place for bullet points in an abstract; use full stops or semi colons to separate lists of results. It is unusual to include a reference. And finally, there should be a space between a number and a unit (but not in 4oC); litres should be a capital L; and always use a colon instead of a dash (for example 'Writing a poster abstract: what not to do').

The poster abstracts are published in the Supplement of Annals of Clinical Biochemistry and Laboratory Medicine. They are all free to view and download from the Annals website. So have a look at abstracts from previous years; those selected for the ACB Medal award are examples of good abstract writing.

So as you start thinking about what you can present at the next meeting please keep all these points in mind. And remember this is a brilliant way to practise your writing skills and to get your work published; in 2013 92% of submitted abstracts were accepted as posters.