

Communicating biomedicine at congresses: a general introduction to posters and oral presentations

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Writing and then publishing a biomedical manuscript is the natural completion of an experiment or of a clinical procedure. In fact, without publication your discoveries will remain in your laboratory or in your ward and will be unknown to the rest of the biomedical community.

Remember that it is your duty to contribute to the construction of an ever-growing biomedical database that will hopefully develop clinical and surgical techniques, therefore improving the health and lives of your patients.

The publication of your paper can also lead to something else, however, which is the invitation to present at a congress.

During this kind of venue you will need to communicate your data using two different kinds of vector: a poster or an oral presentation.

Posters might be considered as ‘first contact’ between young scientists and their peers. Indeed, whereas more experienced professionals can be invited to give oral presentations at congresses, their younger colleagues usually enter this universe through the poster.

This does not mean, of course, that ‘mature’ clinicians never take a poster to a congress. What I mean is that poster presentation can be considered the ideal starting point for the junior doctor in that it does not put the inexperienced congress-goer under excessive pressure.

In any case, let’s get back to the poster session. Biomedical posters are large visual documents that should communicate your discoveries in a captivating manner.

The title needs to be short and clear; the introduction has to put your work into the desired context and stress the objectives, importance and originality of your own study; the methods section should be clear, concise and never too long; the results should take up most of the space on the poster, as this is what most people are interested in reading; finally, your conclusions have to be concise.

A poster must not be weighed down with an excessive amount of information and, ideally, the reader ought to be able to get through it in around ten minutes.

Dedicated poster sessions at congresses are a bit like market stalls, so you need to prepare something which is attractive, and not only informative, if you want it to stand out in the crowd.

Be sure to use a light-colored neutral background that contrasts with the font and makes it easy to read. Do not put in too

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much information when there isn't room for it: you do not have to follow the "IMRAD" (Introduction, Methods, Results and Discussion) format to the letter and you can go into more detail when the viewers ask you questions.

There are generally fewer oral presentations than posters at scientific meetings and they normally tend to be considered more prestigious.

Good research can benefit enormously if the presenter is able to put it over to the audience in an entertaining and convincing fashion. Yet, good oral presentations cannot be improvised.

Everyone needs to practise.

Always know what kind of audience you will have to face: general, specialist or mixed and always give them what they want: a good story.

Without the story (your data) you will have no success, even though you might be the most entertaining public speaker in the uni-

verse. As we have already seen, presenting your work to your colleagues can be considered the cornerstone of your scientific career, so try to do it properly if and when you get the chance.

Speaking in public is, of course, very difficult and creates a great deal of stress. Remember to prepare good visual aids, without exaggerating with PowerPoint technology, and also consider:

- movement and gestures
- stance and posture
- facial expression
- eye contact
- voice clarity and pace
- pointer use
- interaction and ability to deal with questions

Naturally, the situation becomes all the more complicated when people present in a language that is not their own. It is obviously, as with everything else, a matter of practice.

“Questo è il secondo di una serie di articoli sull’argomento.

Potete indirizzare domande (in italiano o in inglese) a michael.john@hsr.it e vedrete le risposte pubblicate su questa rubrica”.

‘This is the second of a series of articles on this topic.

Send any questions to michael.john@hsr.it who will answer them as part of this column.’

Questions from the readers

1 How can we write concise phrases, without developing articulate ideas that are difficult to express in a language we do not have complete control of?

Very simple. Always write directly in English: do not only use English words.

Try to think in English. Extensive reading helps a great deal, not only of biomedical papers but any kind of English writing.

NEVER TRANSLATE from your own language. You can always get some help from a mother-tongue reviewer to polish your not-so-fantastic English BEFORE submitting the paper to your target journal.

By the way, including the reviewer in the Acknowledgements might make referees think twice before criticizing your English, as most referees are not mother-tongue speakers making an acknowledged reviewer a sort of linguistic 'guarantee'.

2 Are there books or Internet sites that can help us translate medical terminology?

Endless Internet sites and online dictionaries can be used for this purpose.

As far as books are concerned, I would highly recommend:

1. Iles R.L. Guidebook to Better Medical Writing (Island Press, 2003).
2. Gustavi B. How to Write and Illustrate a Scientific Paper (Cambridge University Press, 2003).
3. Day R.A. Scientific English: A Guide for Scientists and Other Professionals (Oryx Press, 1995) and, modestly.
4. John M. English for the Medical Profession: Manuale per Studenti e Professionisti (Masson, 2006).

3 Is it better to use UK or USA English when writing a paper?

Naturally this theoretically depends upon the nationality of the target journal. In fact a UK journal logically requires UK English and a USA journal USA English. However, I feel that writers should not worry about which form of English to use and should concentrate instead on uniformity.

This means that if you begin writing using USA English then you must use USA English throughout the paper. As the main difference between UK and USA English lies in the spelling of certain words be sure to set your computer's spellchecker to the form chosen when you start writing. If various authors are involved then agree beforehand which form of English to use.

Furthermore, using USA English can be advantageous as it can be assisted by specialist biomedical spelling software that is readily available for purchase online. I personally always use U SA English when reviewing papers, unless the Instructions to Authors state otherwise.