

MINI CONFERENCE WITH POSTER PRESENTATIONS

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Writing research papers is typically an individual learning experience, the product of which is read only by the instructor for grading purposes. Students' engagement in their research topics and the discipline as a whole can be significantly increased when we promote the exchange of ideas among students. To provide a structured occasion for such conversations, one of us (MM) organized a mini conference in one of my classes (Pastoral Nomads) in which students presented their papers in poster format to the class.

What follows are guidelines for turning your end-of-term paper writing project into one that involves a poster presentation as well. Although it was used first for an upper division cultural anthropology class, it could be used in any anthropology class at any level and of any size. The poster project is but one part of the paper/research project but it does not matter if it is for an archaeology or bio-anthropology class, a world cultures class, or introduction to cultural anthropology. The process "and rules" are pretty much the same.

In addition to allowing for dialogue, the poster format (used by more and more scholars at the annual meetings of the American Anthropological Association) has several pedagogical advantages over the traditional in-front-of-the-whole class talk. Students need not rush through their presentations since multiple posters can be displayed simultaneously. For individuals who are still learning to speak in public, posters can be a less stressful way to communicate their ideas. And because posters are

multi-modal, they accommodate and cultivate a wider range of communicative skills.

Clear models of posters and guidelines for the activity are crucial. You can post links to good and bad posters on a class web site. Giving a hand-out with explicit instructions (see Appendix) enables students to take control of the activity, leaving you free to visit posters as an audience member. You can make a point of visiting posters that are not attracting a big audience, as well as those of students who need additional help.

The role of the audience in the mini-conference is critical. Let students know that you will evaluate their participation as audience members and give suggestions as to how they can provide critical, constructive feedback to their classmates. It is important to emphasize that the exchange of ideas and comments will help students, presenters and audience both, to improve their papers. Leave blank pages at every poster for students to write their comments. Presenters can use these records to improve their papers, and you can use them for evaluation.

Dedicate a week of class to the mini-conference one week before students turn in their papers. This allows them time to incorporate comments on their poster from the teacher and students. Schedule presenters such that there is a good ratio of presenters to audience; otherwise presenters may be over or under-whelmed by the audience.

Evaluate posters on form and substance, but, more importantly, use the opportunity to talk with students about how they can improve their papers.

Students were very enthusiastic about this interactive activity and take the opportunity to learn about and from one another's work. Several students significantly improved their papers by incorporating comments from the audience.

The Appendix handout for students, as presented here, is very general, and it can be modified to suit all classes and all levels. Feel free to use it with modifications to suit your own class needs.

Appendix: Instructions for Students

During the last week of class we will hold a mini conference in which you will present the key arguments and findings of your paper in a poster format. The goal of the presentation is two-fold: (1) to inform the rest of the class of your research findings, and (2) to provide you with feedback on your paper, which you can incorporate in the final written version.

The poster consists of at least seven parts:

- (1) **Title:** a title tells the audience what your paper is about.
- (2) **Abstract:** the abstract is a brief summary of your paper.
- (3) **References:** list the references that you used, including relevant course readings.
- (4) **Map:** indicate where the society is located (if appropriate).
- (5) **Research question:** this tells the audience what you examined and why this is an important question.
- (6) **Results:** this tells the audience what you found in your study.
- (7) **Conclusion:** this tells us the answer to your research question.

The poster should meet the following criteria: The height of the poster is 30 inches and its width 40 inches. All text should be at least in font size 18; headings may be larger. All sections should be limited to a maximum of 250 words (e.g., abstract should not be longer than 250 words).

A well-constructed poster is clear, concise, attractive and self-explanatory. Some general tips: minimize detail and try to use simple, jargon-free statements. Remember that pictures, tables, and figures work well in poster displays. If you can, use color in your visuals. Make sure your lettering is neatly done and is large enough to be read from a distance. Consider using a flow chart or some other method of providing the viewer with a guide to inspecting your display. Don't overwhelm the audience with excessive amounts of information; rather, construct a poster display that enhances conversation. Keep this in mind when you design your poster.

The role of the audience in the mini conference is crucial, as they will give constructive feedback to the presenters. Participation in the conference as audience will be evaluated. Everyone is required to interact with presenters and ask informed and critical questions that help presenters improve their papers. In your questions and comments consider the following: did presenter use and cite relevant course readings? If not, what readings do you suggest? Is the research question clearly written and sufficiently focused? In other words, can the question be explored or answered in a six-page paper? Does the conclusion follow logically from the results of the comparison of the ethnographic data (again if appropriate)? What other factors could the presenter consider in the paper? You are also required to make at least two written suggestions for two different posters. I will make observations in class and read your written comments.