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Introduction

Background

How to communicate ideas effectively is a central skill taught at university, whatever your level of study, degree subject or country. Posters and oral presentations are two ways of communicating ideas in a highly visual, creative and direct way.

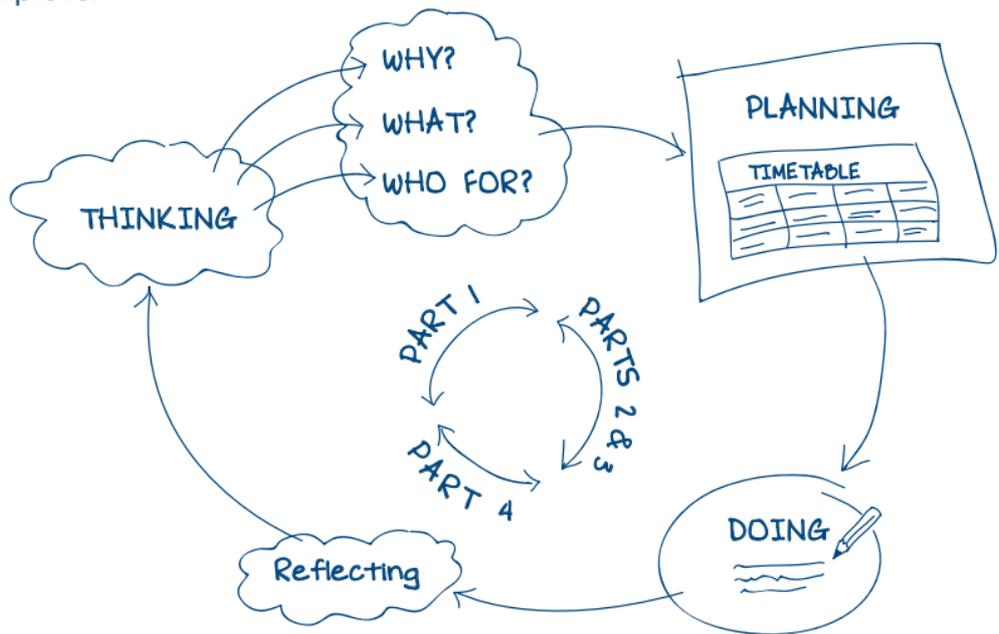
Posters and presentation assessments at university are important for improving your:

- ▶ visual and oral communication skills
- ▶ ability to distil and express your ideas clearly
- ▶ flexibility and effectiveness in communicating with a wide range of audiences
- ▶ employability: communication skills are essential whatever your career aspirations.

Posters and presentation assignments can be the most fun and rewarding, yet they are also the assignments that students get most anxious about. This book will show you what is involved and explain how to prepare well to maximise your potential.

How we planned the book

We planned this book to be a user-friendly guide to working on poster and presentation assignments at university. Using a series of workshops, we take you step by step through four key stages, thinking, planning, doing, and reflecting, so you can improve.



About this book

Part 1 Getting started tells you what your university tutors want and how to get good marks. A series of workshops will develop your skills in the core processes (**thinking** and **planning**) required to start making brilliant posters and presentations.

Part 2 is about **'doing' posters** and shows how to apply the core thinking and planning processes covered in Part 1 to make great posters.

Part 3 is about **'doing' presentations** and shows how to think and plan to make excellent presentations.

Part 4 is about **reflecting to improve** and shows how to interpret feedback and do even better next time. There are tips to help you stand out and ideas for how these skills will be useful in your life after university.

GETTING STARTED

Getting strategic (why, what, who)

Be strategic and use the 6 Ps:

Proper Planning and Preparation

Prevent Poor Performance

Ninety per cent of your coursework is planning and preparation. Be strategic. Plan and prepare well.



WHY

Why have you been asked to produce a poster or presentation? You are given coursework so you can demonstrate that you have met specific **learning outcomes**. You can find these in the **course handbook** or module proforma.

1st year Ecology module:

- After completing the module, you should be able to demonstrate the following **learning outcomes**:
- 1 Identify common behaviours in selected species and explain their purpose.
 - 2 Recognise the influence of the environment on the distribution and abundance of organisms.

Assessments and their learning outcomes

Assessment	Learning outcome	What this means for you ...
Poster	1	Your poster will show the relationship between behaviour and purpose in selected species, using minimal text, good visuals and clear sections and headings.
Group presentation	2	You should take it in turns to talk about the influence of the environment on the distribution and abundance of organisms . Each student should talk about a different environmental factor, or group of organisms. Slides should be coordinated (font, colour) with limited text and good pictures. Be prepared to answer questions after.

Adapted from 1st year Natural Sciences course, LJMU

3rd year Engineering module:

- 1 Demonstrate the ability to conceive, plan and execute a substantial design project.
- 2 Critically review published research relevant to the project.
- 3 Work effectively in a team.
- 4 Demonstrate effective verbal communication skills.

Assessments and their learning outcomes

Assessment	Learning outcome	What this means for you ...
Poster (with supporting portfolio)	1, 3	You should coordinate with group members to produce a poster (with accompanying portfolio) that visually and succinctly summarises the conception, planning and execution stages of a substantial design project .
Individual presentation	1, 2, 4	You will discuss, with visual aids, the conception, planning and execution of your design project supported by thorough research and evaluation of an established body of relevant knowledge . You will also be assessed on your verbal presentation skills . Materials and delivery should be of a professional standard. Be ready to answer challenging questions.

Adapted from 3rd year Engineering course, LJMU

Summative assessment: measures your achievement

Formative assessment: tells you how to improve

Both may be marked but only summative assessments count towards your final mark. Read and act on feedback on both types of assessment: this will help you to improve.



The module handbook is a valuable tool for understanding how university staff planned the course, and what you need to do to excel.

Workshop 1: WHY

- Gather materials: course handbook, online resources, lecture notes, handouts.
- Identify the learning outcomes for your assignment.

The learning outcomes for this assignment are:

First learning outcome:

What I need to do:

Second learning outcome:

What I need to do:

WHAT

What you are expected to do is given in the **assignment guidelines** and **assessment criteria** for your poster or presentation. Your mark will reflect how well you follow the guidelines, according to the criteria. This is an opportunity to show you can produce a product that meets someone else's specified standards: 'This is what you asked me to do ... here it is (and I did it well) 😊.' Being able to follow instructions and deliver a product, or fulfil a client brief, will make you highly employable when you graduate.

First, get the academic content right – the processes that underlie your coursework assignments are largely the same; it is just the *form of delivery* that differs. A good-looking poster, or a confidently delivered oral presentation, will get a low mark if the content is not up to scratch! So do your research.

It's all part of the process ...

The assignment guidelines contain information ('process' or 'instruction' words) about what is expected of you and how you should go about researching the content. If you are instructed to 'evaluate' a topic, make sure you present an appraisal of that topic and not just a description. See *Getting Critical* in this series for a more in-depth discussion of process words.

Analyse: break down into component parts

Compare: examine similarities and **Contrast:** examine differences

Critique: weigh up evidence for and against different arguments and present your own subjective opinion

Define: give clear and concise meanings, including limitations

Describe: state the identifying characteristics

Discuss: examine issues and debates on a subject, present different cases, including the pros and cons of each and your own interesting response to them

Evaluate: weigh up evidence for and against different arguments with objective comment on their relative value

Explain: state the how or why of an issue

Illustrate: give examples, case studies, figures or diagrams that support your argument or help clarify issues being discussed

Interpret: translate or solve a problem giving an answer based on a clear line of reasoning

Justify: present evidence for your decisions/conclusions/interpretations

Outline: state all of the main points, common themes and major differences; avoid small details

Review: identify the major themes or existing range of knowledge in a subject area; also requires you to **critically evaluate*** the material reviewed

*see definitions for both critique and evaluate

'Describe the main types of business model, giving an example for each'

Make a list of the main business models from your course notes or core readings (e.g. course textbook), writing a description and giving clear examples.

'Evaluate the evidence for climate change'

Identify arguments - course materials, literature search (use library search engines; web of knowledge; Google Scholar). Weigh up the evidence for and against each argument. Which studies/arguments are most convincing and why?



Evidence may be supportive of an argument, but not conclusive. There may be grey areas or caveats such as 'our study provides evidence that ... however ... we need more data ...'. Discussing the gaps and uncertainties in a research area is exactly the kind of detail that your assessors will be impressed by. Recent review papers and meta-analyses provide useful summaries of the current state of knowledge and strength of opinions.*

A **review paper** discusses the findings from a large number of papers (and different research groups) and summarises the general themes and future directions. A **meta-analysis paper** presents an analysis of the data from lots of studies conducted by different research groups at different times.

Workshop 2: Using the assignment guidelines – process words

- Write down the key process words in the **assignment guidelines**.
- Write what each word means, and what you need to do to achieve it (start with process words given in the assignment title).
- Reread the assignment title. Make sure you answer *all of the question*.

Process word 1: Evaluate ...

This means I need to ... *weigh up evidence for and against different arguments with objective comment on their relative value ...*

I will do this by ... *finding journal articles on the topic (especially recent review papers or meta-analyses), identifying the main arguments and objectively assessing their relative merit: which arguments are most widely supported by researchers?; published in the best journals?; sample size and methodological issues. I will use my study skills module notes, Getting Critical in this series, and sign up for the library course on literature reviews.*

Your process word 1:

This means I need to:

.....

I will do this by:

.....

Now go and research your topic! Use your notes from Workshops 1 and 2 to keep you on track.

Content with the content?

Have you ever received feedback saying *You have not answered the question?* Before you write anything (but after you have done your research!), know what it is you want to say.

Your message should be:

- ▶ clear, concise and answer the question
- ▶ interesting and informative
- ▶ attractive and attention grabbing.

Workshop 3: Using the assignment guidelines – message and content

- Take your literature search notes, notes from Workshops 1 and 2 and a sheet of paper.
- Write ‘*My message is ...*’ in the centre of the sheet.
- Write down all the keywords that relate to your assignment topic.
- Circle the KEY words that relate to the PRIMARY MESSAGE you want to convey – these should appear in the main text/words and title.
- Remove words that are *not* directly related to your primary message – these should *not* appear in your title or main text (but may be mentioned in the discussion or during a question session as future directions or wider implications).
- Store this in your work folder and refer to it regularly to keep on track!

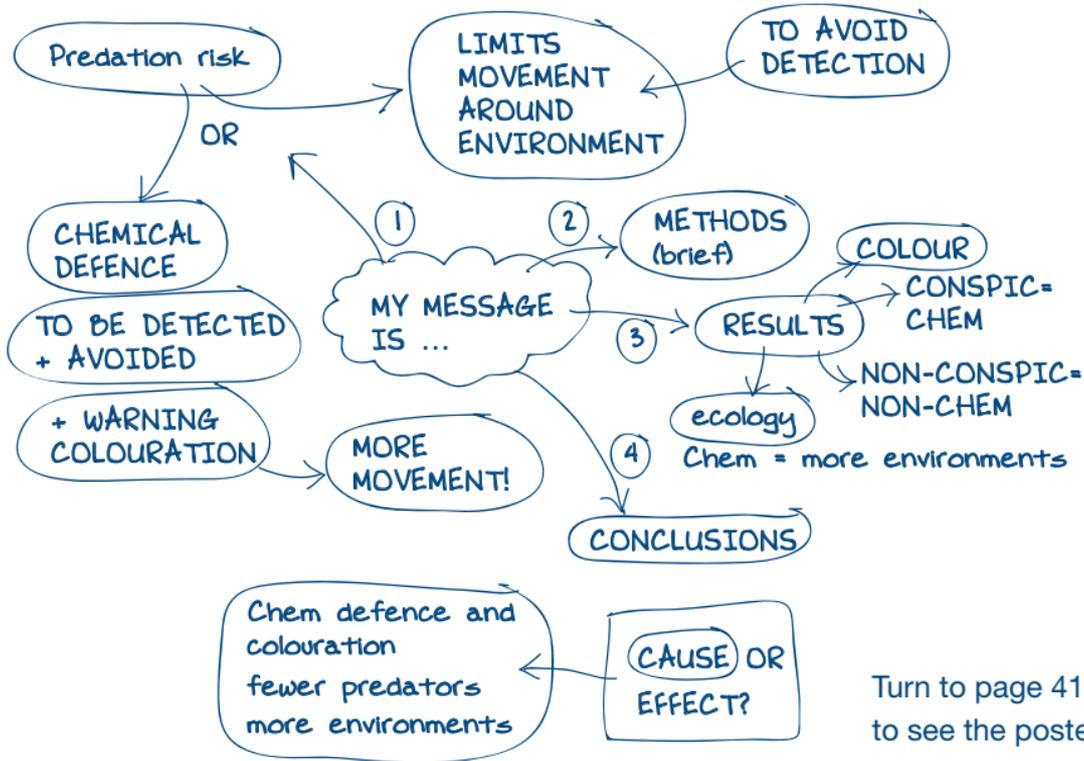
My message is:

.....

.....

.....

.....



Turn to page 41 to see the poster.

Assessment criteria

Research shows that students who spend time considering the assessment criteria prior to starting a piece of work get significantly higher marks than students who do not (Rust, Price and O'Donovan 2003).

Class/grade	Assignments/essays
First class work	
90–100%	Outstanding work showing creative ability. Excellent critical evaluation of all issues with <u>development of original material</u> . Extensive reading used to direct arguments. Outstanding level of intellectual work.
80–90%	Very high quality work showing clear understanding of the subject matter. Good critical evaluation covering all issues. Reading used to direct arguments. Very high level of intellectual work.

Terms like 'creative ability' and 'originality' indicate you have developed your own well-informed ideas, can communicate them well and have something to contribute to the field. These qualities will set you apart as an outstanding student.

Class/grade	Assignments/essays
First class work	
70–80%	High quality work showing strong grasp of subject matter. Some critical evaluation. Arguments well formulated and sustained. Consideration of all dominant issues. Selective use of relevant literature.
Satisfactory work	
60–70%	Solid work showing competent understanding of subject matter. <u>Limited critical evaluation</u> . Arguments developed and supported with relevant literature. Appreciation of main issues with referencing. <u>Well prepared and presented material</u> . Writing coherent.
50–60%	Adequate work but lacking depth and breadth. <u>Descriptive</u> approach. Referencing unfocused. Competent writing.

At first class level, focus is on content. Your writing and presentation should already be of a high standard. You may be able to attend writing workshops for free at your university for help with this.

The reason many students gain a high second class mark rather than a first class mark is due to a lack of critical evaluation. Again – check out extra support to develop this skill.

These are essential for a first class mark. Good preparation and presentation can improve your mark.

Suggests lack of critical evaluation. Arguments may be presented but are not fully developed. If you make a statement, be sure to follow it up with evidence.

From here to ‘outstanding’

Take a look at these example assignments. What could you do to attain first-class criteria such as ‘outstanding’?

Assignment	Good enough to pass	What can I do to be ‘outstanding’?
<p><i>‘Describe the main types of business model, giving an example for each’</i> (1st year, Business Studies)</p>	<p>List and describe examples given in course materials.</p>	<p>Make sure you describe <i>all</i> the relevant models you were given on the course.</p> <p>Present the information in a way that demonstrates your deeper understanding of the links or relationships between the different models. For example, group the models according to common themes, list them in chronological order, or distinguish currently favoured models from the less popular.</p> <p>Give examples from extra reading in addition to those listed in the course materials, or from your own experience.</p>

Assignment	Good enough to pass	What can I do to be 'outstanding'?
'Evaluate the evidence for climate change' (3rd year, Environmental Sciences)	Present the arguments given in the course materials. Support with evidence from the key readings.	Give examples from extra reading, especially from very recent articles. Identify latest developments in the field, new directions for research, current controversies. Comment on the quality of the science (sample size, rigour of methods, how widely cited are papers or their authors). Are there problems with some methods or conclusions? Are there wider implications (e.g. for environmental policy)? (These may only need brief mention.)

In Parts 2 and 3 we present more specific, real-life examples of assessment criteria that are used for undergraduate posters and presentations.

Pay particular attention if you tend to avoid tackling criteria that are harder to grasp (such as 'high standard of critical evaluation', 'excellent analytical approach'). You are not alone (Rust, Price and O'Donovan 2003), but it will affect your final mark if you do not take time to think about what you are being asked to do. If you are still unsure about the meaning of some assessment criteria, take another look at the process words on **p. 6**.

Workshop 4: WHAT

Locate the **assessment criteria** for a first-class grade (aim high!).

The assessment criteria my tutor will use to assess that I have achieved the learning outcomes to a first-class standard are:

Criterion 1: *excellent use of visuals that clearly support the main argument being presented. To achieve this I need to: use high quality images, learn to use graphics software to create professional looking graphs containing all the correct elements (see Chapters 7 and 11).*

Criterion 2: *at least six peer-reviewed journal articles cited and referenced correctly. To achieve this I need to: do a thorough literature search to find the main researchers in the field and find key papers; identify which six present the best coverage of current knowledge; refer to my course notes on how to cite and reference papers.*

Your criterion 1:

To achieve this I need to:

.....

Your criterion 2:

To achieve this I need to:

.....

WHO

Who you will produce your poster or presentation for is your tutor: the person who will mark your work. This is the person who has told you which learning outcomes they want you to demonstrate, and what assessment criteria they will use to assess your learning. This is the person you need to keep happy!

The assignment guidelines may state a second, 'imagined' audience for your work in 'the real world'. When marking your work, the marker will read your poster or listen to your presentation as if they were not just your university tutor but also a member of the imagined audience.

WHO

Example imagined audience	How should you pitch to the imagined audience?
Customer to buy your product	Good clear sales pitch. What does the product do/offer? What problems does it solve? Clear, attractive, professional presentation of information.
Members of public	Grab attention with good graphics and a clear message (people are busy or might not speak your language).
Healthcare professionals	Your audience is professional, with expert knowledge but limited time. Images must be clear. Text/words must be concise and informative.
'Expert' academic audience	Make implications of your study for furthering knowledge clear. This audience wants depth and detail.

Workshop 5: WHO

Identify the **imagined** and **real** audience for your work. These may be given explicitly in the assignment details, or may be implicit. If in doubt, check with your tutor.

The assessment criteria my tutor will use to assess that I have achieved the learning outcomes to a first-class standard are:

Imagined audience:

I need to pitch to this audience in the following way:

.....
.....

Real audience (tutor):

I need to demonstrate that I have: *followed the assignment guidelines and meet the assessment criteria*

.....

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