PRESENTING EFFECTIVE AND AWARD-WINNING STUDENT POSTERS AT SAA MEETINGS

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Poster symposia are centerpieces of the SAA annual meeting. The first research posters—all six of them—were displayed for the entire conference on a tiered balcony at the 1980 meeting in Philadelphia. At the most recent in-person SAA meeting in Albuquerque, 699 contributors, along with their coauthors, packed the dedicated poster exhibition space. Now representing over 20% of all research presentations at the annual meetings, posters are an effective way to present archaeological research, to foster in-depth discussions, and to network. This is particularly true for undergraduate and graduate students: during the past three years, students were the lead authors on 55% of the 1,519 posters presented at the SAA annual meeting (Figure 1).

The technologies of poster making and scholarship in designing accessible and engaging content have significantly advanced as posters have grown as an important medium for disseminating research. Suggestions by Jeffrey A. Homburg (2005) in the *Record* remain core to designing effective posters: minimize text; explicitly and concisely state the purpose, methods, research question, and conclusions; and use clear figures and images to your advantage. However, innovations of the past 15 years provide an opportunity for archaeologists to rethink how we present posters.

This article, co-written by current and former members of the SAA Student Poster Award Committee, as well as by students who have presented posters at recent SAA meetings, shares insights on how to create engaging posters. All students are encouraged to submit their eligible posters to the SAA Student Poster Award competition, which comes with recognition by the SAA as well as an award of $750 for the winning poster author or coauthors. By
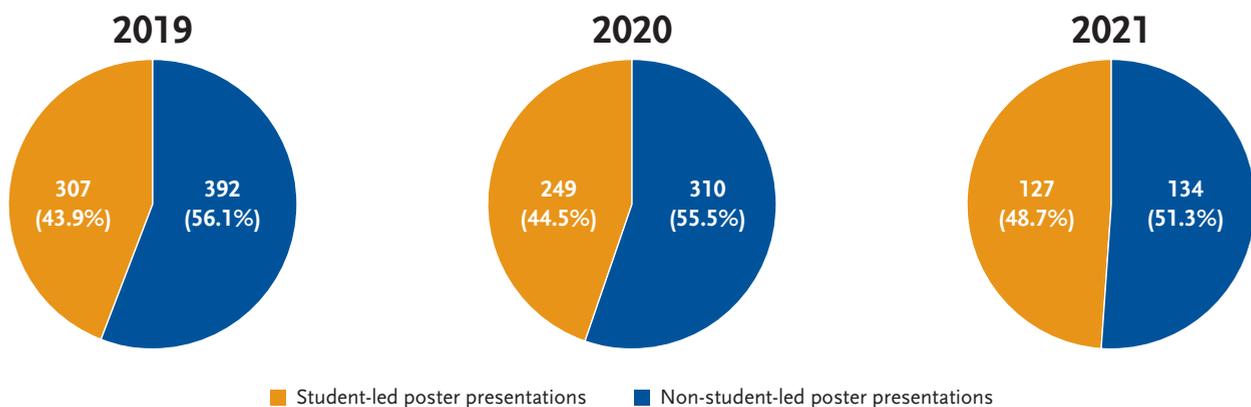
Student versus Non-student-led Poster Presentations

Figure 1. Pie charts of student- versus non-student-led poster presentations at SAA meetings from 2019 through 2021.

highlighting the benefits of presenting posters at the SAA annual meeting, we encourage more students to submit their posters to the Student Poster Award competition.

Why Posters? Presenter Perspectives

Why are poster presentations a central and growing part of SAA meetings? The answer can be found in the perspectives of students and professional archaeologists alike who have experience with this critical medium for presenting information.

Professional and Mentor Perspective: Eric Jones

I presented my first poster at the 2000 SAA meeting in Philadelphia as an undergraduate student. It was my first experience with anthropology outside of the confines of the college I attended and was a formative experience in helping me decide on a career in archaeology. It was the first time I could actually envision myself being an archaeologist because I was conversing with other undergraduates, graduate students, and professionals about my own research. As an unabashed supporter of posters, I believe they are the best presentation form if you want to directly engage with others about your work. Over the course of my career, more than three-quarters of my conference presentations have been posters. I have also worked with more than 20 undergraduates and a handful of graduate students on poster presentations at both regional conferences and SAA annual meetings.

Presentation of our work in any medium is arguably the most important part of the research process. In my own career and for students who have worked with me, the interactive nature of posters has been critical in disseminating our work. Posters allow for our work to be experienced as a whole, from the original question through the methods and results to the next steps. They allow for the presentation of engaging graphics. And, most importantly, they allow for the audience to ask questions and to converse with us as they learn about each step of our work. I believe this ability to engage in real time as opposed to after the fact creates a deeper, shared understanding of the work we do.

I have found the personal interactions posters facilitate as critical for building both research and community partnerships for myself and students. What we do on an almost daily basis is talk *with* people—colleagues, co-workers, students, staff, family, friends, community members, and others—about our work. I view these conversations as critical for building communities within our field and for making archaeology relevant outside of our field. For students, posters provide valuable experience in doing just that. They are unlike papers in that they allow your audience to get to know the person behind the work. At meetings, anyone can walk through the poster rooms and talk with you—professors, CRM professionals, students, vendors, publishers, and community partners alike—so it makes you better at communicating your work in real-world situations where you need to be technical, general, and applied from one minute to the next. These are valuable skills in any future career. For those students pursuing a career in archaeology, posters provide excellent opportunities for networking. I am not a good networker, and meetings can be daunting places to approach strangers and to have conversations with them. Posters facilitate such interactions, and they have helped me meet people I never would have on my own.

Student Perspective: Caroline Watson

The first poster I presented was at the 2019 SAA meeting in Albuquerque, as an undergraduate coauthor and co-presenter with Dr. Eric Jones. The research we presented was considered a pilot project. As such, the SAA poster session was the perfect context to both share our new research ideas with a broad audience and receive immediate, varied, and candid feedback. Working with a co-presenter also meant that multiple conversations could take place at once, which promoted more engagement with the poster and our research overall. Interacting with archaeologists of all levels and backgrounds led to some challenging yet insightful questions about our research. For me, these interactions were great practice in learning how to communicate clearly and think quickly, two presentation skills that are difficult to master.

Drafting our poster and preparing for the session was also a valuable process. Foremost, I learned of the importance of visualization, as I was required to engage with images, graphs, colors, and fonts and ultimately to ask, "Is this the best way to present our data and methodologies?" Asking ourselves this question is vital, because if we (archaeologists) intend to share our work with the general public, the stakeholder community, and even other archaeologists outside our region or specialization, we must make our work understandable and enticing. Secondly, working within the physical dimensions of the poster meant that every word counted. Writing the poster text itself is a great experience in learning how to be clear, concise, and intentional. This can prove to be a difficult task to an amateur academic writer and researcher such as myself, who can get easily wrapped up in wordy explanations and minute details.

Finally, at the undergraduate level, your network of connections and resources is often confined to your academic institution and advisor. The personal interaction that occurs at poster sessions creates an opportunity to expand this network. Overall, presenting a poster as an undergraduate archaeologist was a rewarding experience. Being in a large room with other presenters, all of whom had unique research ideas and who came from an array of universities and organizations, made me feel like I was a part of something bigger than myself. This feeling is certainly what propels me through my current experiences as a graduate student.

Designing Better Posters

The best posters share well-designed and well-executed research. As a result, award-winning posters start at the beginning of the

research process, long before you print and hang your poster at the SAA meeting. Be sure you have clear research questions; a research design that connects methods, data, analysis, and theory to answer these questions; and conclusions that link back to your research questions and the broader topics with which you are engaging.

In a crowded exhibition hall, you want to grab the attention of the audience. Give them a reason to linger and chat. For example, you can title your poster around a big compelling question, such as "Did Cremation Mask Social Inequalities in Bronze Age Transylvania?" as opposed to a more traditional title like "Mortuary Archaeology in Middle Bronze Age Transylvania, Romania (2000–1500 BC)."

Alternatively, you can design your poster around captivating maps, imagery, and photographs that help tell your story. The most visually engaging posters also have consistency in design elements. For your text, use only one or two font styles, keep font sizes consistent and large (at least 24 point), and use sans-serif fonts for better readability. Maintain a consistent and complementary color palette throughout the poster, including for graphs and images.

Convey complex information in a digestible format. Bullet points are easier to read quickly and from a distance than paragraphs. Graphs and figures are easier to digest than data-heavy tables. One of the greatest advantages of a poster is that, unlike a paper presentation, it does not have to follow a traditional linear progression. As such, you can let the layout help tell the story. Be sure to provide visual cues to guide the audience through the poster. Text boxes, strategic use of empty space, and arrows can encourage the audience to read left to right, top to bottom, or even from the middle out to the edges. As with any scholarly

work, don't forget to cite your sources and acknowledge those individuals and institutions who have helped you. You will likely want to shrink these sections down to preserve space on the poster.

Poster sessions provide unique opportunities to convey the results of your well-designed research, but there are also some challenges to consider in designing posters. Be careful when using images for the poster background, as they can be distracting from the figures and text in the poster itself. If you want to use a background image, muting or fading the color will reduce distractions. This can be achieved by using a white transparent layer between the background image and the main poster elements. You want to make sure that the poster design you are using highlights, rather than distracts from, your research.

Perhaps most importantly, posters should be designed with equity in mind. For example, color blindness affects one in 12 males (8.0%) and one in 200 females (0.5%). Select a color scheme that is consistent with universal design principles and accessible for everyone (Crameri et al. 2020). Using large fonts ensures that posters can be easily read from a distance, which is particularly important for people of varying sightedness. Fortunately, many of the strategies for making posters more visually appealing and accessible are one and the same.

The Logistics of Making Posters

The logistics of poster making include software selection, poster printing, poster transportation, and cost. Many people use Microsoft PowerPoint or Adobe Illustrator to design posters, although other programs can also be used (Table 1). PowerPoint is widely known, accessible on PC or Mac, and easy

Table 1. Assessment of Common Software for Making Posters.

Software	Pros	Cons
PowerPoint	• Easy to use and widely known • Accessible	• Max page size is 56" × 56". For larger posters, you need to create them at half-size and print at 2× • Less customizable than other programs • Doesn't work well with vector images
Illustrator	• Very customizable • Vector-based = higher-resolution images	• Costly (~$240) • Steep learning curve
Inkscape	• Open-source (free) • Very similar to Illustrator • Vector-based = higher-resolution images	• Steep learning curve • Formatting issues if opened and saved on multiple OS (e.g., switching between a Mac and PC) or other programs (e.g., Illustrator and Inkscape)
Graphic	• Vector-based = higher-resolution images	• $30 • Mac only
Scribus	• Open-source (free) • Highly customizable	• Steep learning curve

to use, but it is less easily customizable than other options, like Illustrator, Inkscape, or Graphic, which are vector-based and produce higher-resolution images. These programs have a steeper learning curve for those unfamiliar with their interface. Access to cost-prohibitive software programs vary by institution, but open-source software contains many of the same functions as their closed-source counterparts (Table 1).

In addition to deciding which software to create the poster with, presenters must decide which medium and where they will print their poster. It is advisable to print posters prior to traveling to the conference. Posters can be printed on paper or fabric. For paper posters, large plotter printers on campus may offer a reduced price compared to commercial stores, but university systems may require posters to be uploaded a few days in advance of printing. Printing posters on fabric is becoming increasingly common at academic meetings. One the main advantages of fabric posters is that that can be folded in a suitcase or backpack for ease of travel.

During travel, a telltale sign of a conference goer is the poster tube. Poster tubes protect the poster as one travels to the conference venue, ensuring the paper does not get torn, crinkled, or folded during transport. Poster tubes are fairly inexpensive, or students may be able to borrow a poster tube from a faculty member. One disadvantage to a poster tube is additional baggage costs, particularly for airplane travel; if the presenter has a poster tube, backpack, and suitcase, one or two items must be checked, leaving the presenter with the conundrum of which item to check, weighing the consequences if any baggage is lost in transit. Likewise, poster tubes may have trouble fitting in the overhead compartment depending on the size of the plane and available overhead storage space.

Poster printing costs vary greatly but planning ahead can reduce the cost of presenting a poster and, simultaneously, ensure that your research poster is prepared in time to submit to the annual SAA Student Poster Award deadline, which is typically a month in advance of the annual meeting. Students should check with their departments and universities for conference travel grants and funding to present at conferences, which will diminish out-of-pocket expenses. Additionally, other funding opportunities and microgrant programs may be available to cover conference expenses.

Beyond the Poster

Poster sessions are inherently social and interactive. Advances in technology, social media, and material culture can further increase engagement with your research. Recent trends on social media, including #betterposter, encourage the use of QR codes to enhance poster presentations and research accessibility. QR codes can be used to link to references (Figure 2), larger tables, datasets, and research findings such as recently

published papers that would otherwise clutter a poster, and they are easy to create and paste onto the poster. QR codes can link to videos and imagery that simply do not work in the traditional poster format, such as a short summary video of the key points of your research poster. This way, poster session attendees can continue to learn about your research after the poster session is over.

In addition to including QR codes, social media platforms including Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, LinkedIn, and Facebook are useful tools for increasing the visibility of your research both at the SAA meeting and beyond. Adding your social media handle on your poster encourages other scholars to follow your work. Promoting your research and conference session on social media may encourage attendees to visit your poster session while simultaneously engaging with those who are not able to attend the conference. Using hashtags can further promote your poster presentation, especially if it is the hashtag affiliated with the meeting (e.g., #SAA86thOnline).

Posters can be enhanced with technology as well as handouts, business cards, and material culture to increase engagement with the audience. Printed handouts of your poster, brief bullet point summaries of the key findings, business cards, and recent publications associated with your poster help the audience engage with your research after the conference ends. Finally, material culture can bring your poster to life! Experimentally produced or replicated artifacts allow the audience to draw on tactile learning as you present your research. Creating multiple modes of engagement with your scholarship and providing the means for the audience to control how they engage, can help promote more equity in the communication of archaeological research.

After the Meeting

Poster presenters may be left wondering what to do with their posters once the conference is over. There are several options that help increase the visibility of your research and, potentially, strengthen relationships and create transparency with the stakeholder communities. First, some symposia, such as departmental conferences, may encourage students to re-present their SAA posters. You should always check with the conference coordinator first, and often this may not justify a new presentation line on your CV. Many departments display student posters, highlighting student-led research (Figure 3). At the Belize Archaeology Symposium, archaeologists who present at the SAA meeting are encouraged to bring their posters to Belize and display them to both the academic community and the greater public. Finally, we can offer our posters to the communities with whom we work, so they may display them in public areas such as community centers, visitor centers, and museums (Figure 4), broadening the impact of our research.

Figure 2. A sample poster, which includes QR codes and social media handles.

Figure 3. (a) Displaying posters in departmental space after the meetings can increase their use-life (photo by Paulina Przystupa). (b) Adding artifact replicas to poster displays increases audience engagement (photo by Colin P. Quinn).

Student Poster Award

The Student Poster Award acknowledges the best student presentation of archaeological research in poster sessions at the SAA annual meeting (https://www.saa.org/career-practice/awards/student-poster-award). So, how can you earn this award? There are three key factors. First, the committee considers the significance and originality of the research that is presented. Second, the committee evaluates the effectiveness of the presentation of the research in the poster format. Award-winning posters not only look good but also make substantive research contributions. The evaluation rubrics that recent committees have used are a great place to start to see how posters are evaluated (Table 2). The third and most important factor: you must submit your poster by the deadline, approximately one month before the meeting, to be eligible. The submission deadline for 2022 is February 23. We often see excellent student posters at the meeting that would have been strong contenders for the award if only the authors had submitted the poster by the deadline. With the added incentive of an award of $750 for the winning poster (new in 2021), it is worth getting your poster done early so you can submit it to the SAA Student Poster Award.

Figure 4. Re-used SAA posters were included as part of a pop-up museum event to celebrate cultural heritage in Bucium, Romania (photo by Colin P. Quinn).

Table 2. The Criteria Used by the Student Poster Award Committee in 2021 to Score Posters, Including Descriptions of the Highest Scores in Each Category from the Full Rubric.

Category	Criterion	Highest Score
Research Significance and Originality (60% of score)	Problem	Thoroughly but concisely presents research problem/hypothesis with thorough but concise background information.
	Solutions	Solution to problem is thoroughly but concisely explained and innovative.
	Methodology	Methodology is clearly explained and is rigorous.
	Conclusions	Conclusions are engaging, evaluating the methodology and stating how the research addressed the problem/hypothesis.
	Citations	Cites all data obtained from other sources in proper style; includes page numbers where needed.
Presentation of Information (40% of total score)	Graphics (e.g., tables, figures, etc.)	Graphics are engaging and enhance the text.
	Visual Presentation (background, colors, spacing, arrangement, etc.)	Overall visually appealing, not cluttered; colors and patterns enhance readability; background adds additional information to poster.
	Readability	Uses font sizes/variations that facilitate the organization, presentation, and readability of the research; easily readable from 1 m away.
	Precise Text	No "flabby" sentences; minimal passive voice; no spelling or grammar mistakes.
	Information Flow	Content is clearly arranged so that the viewer can understand order without narration; information is well balanced.

Conclusions

This article discusses how to create well-designed research posters and encourages students to submit their posters to the SAA Student Poster Award. Poster presentations provide an ideal setting for students and established professionals alike to present their research in an engaging format while expanding their networks. The SAA poster sessions have come a long way since the first poster session in 1980 with increases in poster presentations and changes in technology. We hope to see increases in submissions for the SAA Student Poster Award, and we look forward to engaging poster sessions at future SAA meetings.

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New Release from The SAA Press

Archaeological Narratives of the North American Great Plains: From Ancient Pasts to Historic Resettlement

BY SARAH J. TRABERT AND KACY L. HOLLENBACK
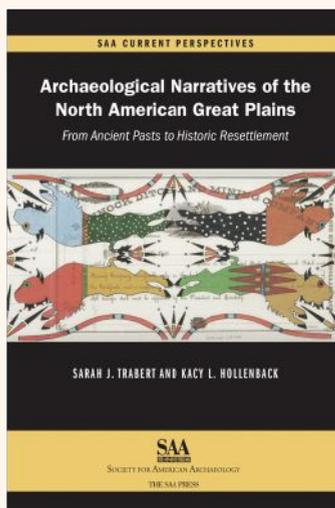
Stretching from Canada to Texas and the foothills of the Rockies to the Mississippi River, the North American Great Plains have a complex and ancient history. The region has been home to Native peoples for at least 16,000 years. This volume is a synthesis of what is known about the Great Plains from an archaeological perspective, but it also highlights Indigenous knowledge, viewpoints, and concerns for a more holistic understanding of both ancient and more recent pasts. Written for readers unfamiliar with archaeology in the region, the book emphasizes connections between past peoples and contemporary Indigenous nations, highlighting not only the history of the area but also new theoretical understandings that move beyond culture history. This overview illustrates the importance of the Plains in studies of exchange, migration, conflict, and sacred landscapes, as well as contact and colonialism in North America. In addition, the volume includes considerations of federal policies and legislation, as well as Indigenous social movements and protests over the last hundred years so that archaeologists can better situate Indigenous heritage, contemporary Indigenous concerns, and lasting legacies of colonialism today.

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