The best way to learn how to grade the condition of posters is by looking at a lot of examples of what can happen to a poster. Luckily for you, and not so for me, my collection happens to have a lot of fine examples of poster degradation, so I have put together a little archive of what you don’t want to have too much of in your collection.

To start with, be sure to read the Rosetta Stone for estimating condition, as written by Jacaeb Kastor of Psychedelic Solution, considered by many, including myself, to be the expert's expert when it comes to the fine art of postering. You can read it here! A CP000037 “Poster Grading Chart”.

WARNING!!!! Some of these images are large, so that you can see the poster defects, so be forwarned if you have a slow connection. Also, there are a lot of them, so have fun.

PERFECT: A/A. Here is the corner of a poster fresh for the printers box. It does not get any more perfect than this, but even here you can see some ink imperfections, so a rule to consider is: If life is imperfect, posters are too. They are, not by design, but by nature, imperfect. The perfection may affect the price, but seldom need to affect the enjoyment of the poster. In fact, many a funky poster has made for great enjoyment. Sometimes I like the odd raggedy poster, because I am not afraid to touch and enjoy it.

WRECKED: If you want to see a poster that is beyond salvaging, except for an illustration like this, check you this copy of FD-26, perhaps the most immediately recognizable poster in the FD-series. Our thanks to Jacaeb Kastor for contributing this (our worst nightmare) poster.

The next sections will take you through a brief tour of condition.
Corner Defects by Michael Erlewine

CORNERS: The corners are the first to go, because they stick out in the world and are the most vulnerable. Almost any poster that has been handled much has some corner wear, and this is to be expected, and not considered a harsh defect, as long as it is slight. When it gets seriously blunted, that is a different matter, and when torn off, well.....
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Corner Bend, Missing Ink

Corner Missing

Corner Gone and Frayed Edge
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Corner Bend, Tack Hole

Corner Taped

Corner Taped Fill

Corner Bent, Slight Buckle

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Tack and Pin Holes

TACK AND PIN HOLES: Posters were designed to tacked (or glued!) to the wall, so it makes no sense to go crazy about their being tack holes in a poster. In fact a nice set of pinholes adds a touch of world elegance to a poster, much like the odd gold earring sends an "out of the box" message. A set of holes means this poster actually was used for the event or to grace someone’s quarters. Not a bad thing.

Pinholes are generally very acceptable and a nice set of tack holes, even with the circular impression of the thumbtack head is not to be overly frowned on. Tack hole tears are another matter. They are to be discouraged and generally affect the price of the poster. And harsh tears, where the poster was ripped down with the tacks in place, leaving long tears are not welcome. The same goes for a set of staple marks, which are like multiple pinholes, at their best. Staple holes are cool, unless they are some big whopper that tears up the poster. Multiple holes are uncool.
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Pin Hole

Tack Hole Tear

Staple Holes

Multiple Tack Holes
Edge Wear: The Crease and the Crumple

EDGE WEAR: THE CREASE AND THE CRUMPLE: Posters get edge wear, in particular with glossy slick posters, edge wear is almost to be expected. Large glossy posters seem to defy handling and almost always show edge wear. While edge wear is never welcome, it usually does not affect the central image and vanishes the moment the poster is framed. And there is all kinds of edge wear, as looking at the shots below will illustrate. These range from tiny abrasions that just flare the lip of the edge to gaping sections gone, showing air.

And there is the crease and the crumple. Creases can be at the corners, but they can also affect large sections of the poster. Same with the crumple. These are never cool and while they may be insignificant, they often extend into the poster image. Some posters of handbills have been folded in half, and that’s that.
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- Edge Crumple
- Edge and Corner Crumple
- Edge Damage
- Edge Damage, Serious
- Edge Damage and Crumple
- Taped Edges
- Edge and Corner Damage
Fingerprints and Back Hinges

FINGERPRINTS AND GLOSSY STOCK: Watch out for these, because you can easily create them, in particular on glossy thin stock. A technique for handling these, taught to me by Brad Kelly, is to use a poster-it note to pick them up and raise them so that you can get your hands under them. Fingerprints can be removed, but I will have to get one of the experts to write a short description of how to do it.

MISSING PIECES: Hey, there are no good missing pieces, so I can't help explain that away. If it is gone, it is gone. There is an article on this site on restoration and some poster collectors restore their posters to raise their value. While I understand why they do this, I have never done it and don't even like to see the signs of restoration, but that's just me.
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- Missing Piece
- Abrasion
- Tear
- Tape-over

- Signature on Back

- Missing Piece and Tape

- Poster Mounted on Board

- Damage Serious
SMUDGES: Smudges are easy to come by and hard to see coming and to get off. There are ways to do this, but I don't know them well enough to be your instructor on this. They are not cool.

Tears

TEARS: Tears of all kinds can happen, in particular as the poster gets old and brittle. Some of them are just along the edges and at the corners, but they can occur right in the middle of the image and do. Taping them is not good. You will find a lot of old posters taped to beat hell. Check out some of the examples below.
Stains

STAINS: Stains, especially big greasy or oil stains are bad. They really affect the value of the poster. Most any other damage does not matter too much if you want to frame the posters, but stains are visible and alter the way the poster works, in particular if they are large and in the image area.
So there you have it, at least some introduction to what can go wrong to our posters and what to look for in buy or selling a poster. Combine looking at these images with Jacaebor Kastor’s article on grading, mentioned above, and you are on your way to learning the fine art of poster grading.