

Adrian Wallwork

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# English for Presentations at International Conferences

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*Second Edition*

# English for Academic Research

**Series editor**

Adrian Wallwork

Pisa

Italy

This series aims to help non-native, English-speaking researchers communicate in English. The books in this series are designed like manuals or user guides to help readers find relevant information quickly, and assimilate it rapidly and effectively. The author has divided each book into short subsections of short paragraphs with many bullet points.

More information about this series at <http://www.springer.com/series/13913>

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 Springer

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English for Academics  
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# Preface

## Who is this book for?

This book is part of the *English for Research* series of guides for academics of all disciplines who work in an international field. This volume focuses on preparing and giving presentations. Problems with language (both written and oral) are dealt with extensively, whereas the technical/graphical elements of creating slides are given less space.

The book is designed to help both those who have never done presentations before and researchers whose English is already good (or who are native speakers) but who want to improve their presentation skills.

Chapter 19 is specifically designed to help native speakers present to an audience of non-natives.

The majority of the guidelines given are appropriate for any language, i.e. not just English.

EAP trainers can use this book in conjunction with: *English for Academic Research: A Guide for Teachers*.

## What does this book cover?

*English for Presentations at International Conferences* will help you to

- learn how to assess other people's presentations, including those on TED
- overcome problems with nerves and embarrassment

- prepare and practice a well-organized, interesting presentation
- highlight the essential points you want the audience to remember
- avoid problems in English by using short easy-to-say sentences
- attract and retain audience attention
- decide what to say at each stage of the presentation
- improve your pronunciation
- learn useful phrases
- deal with questions from the audience
- gain confidence and give a memorable presentation
- network and find new research opportunities

## **How is the book organized?**

Chapters 1-5 cover the initial preparation: learning from others (analysing TED presentations) deciding what to say, creating slides in support of what you want to say, etc.

Chapters 6-11 break down the presentation into its separate parts from the first words to the Q&A session.

Chapters 12-15 focus on practising and improving your presentation and your delivery (including pronunciation), and handling your nerves.

The final chapters, 16-19, deal with other aspects of international conferences -networking and posters - plus a chapter dedicated to native English speakers.

Chapter 20 contains a list of useful phrases.

## **How are the chapters organized?**

Each chapter has the following three-part format:

### **1) FACTOIDS / WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY**

In most cases, this section is a brief introduction to the topic of the chapter. Occasionally, the factoids are simply interesting in themselves and have no

particularly relevance to the chapter in question. However, they can be used by EAP teachers as warm-ups for their lessons. All the statistics and quotations are genuine, though in some cases I have been unable to verify the original source.

## 2) WHAT'S THE BUZZ?

This is designed to get you thinking about the topic, through a variety of useful but entertaining exercises. These exercises can be done either by the reader alone, or in class with an EAP (English for Academic Purposes) teacher / trainer. The final part of each *What's the buzz?* section is a brief outline of the contents of the chapter.

## 3) The rest of each chapter is divided up into short subsections in answer to specific questions.

## How should I read this book?

This book is designed to be like a manual or a user guide—you don't need to read it starting from page 1. Like a manual it has lots of short subsections and is divided into short paragraphs with many bullet points. This is to help you find what you want quickly and also to assimilate the information as rapidly and as effectively as possible.

You can use the Table of Contents as a checklist of things to remember.

## Differences from the first edition

There are two main differences from the first edition. Firstly, each chapter now begins with Factoids and a *What's the buzz?* section. Secondly, there are four new chapters (Chaps. 16–19) on networking, preparing and presenting posters, and advice for native English speakers on how to present to a non-native audience.

## I am a trainer in EAP and EFL. Should I read this book?

If you are a teacher of English for Academic Purposes or English as a Foreign Language you will learn about all the typical problems that non-native researchers have in the world of academia. You will be able to give your students advice on writing quality research papers and getting referees and editors to accept their papers. In addition, you will generate a lot of stimulating and fun discussions by using the factoids and quotations, along with the *What's the buzz?* exercises.

There is a teacher's guide to accompany this *English for Academic Research* series, with notes on how to exploit all the books: *English for Academic Research: A Guide for Teachers*.



## **Are the examples in this book taken from real presentations?**

Most of the examples are taken from real presentations. Others are manipulated versions of the originals. A few are complete inventions, but nevertheless generally contain real data. All the statistics in the factoids are, to the best of my knowledge, true. Most, but not all, statistics in the example presentations are true.

## **The author**

Since 1984 Adrian Wallwork has been editing and revising scientific papers, as well as teaching English as a foreign language. In 2000 he began specializing in training PhD students from all over the world in how to write and present their research in English. He is the author of over 30 textbooks for Springer Science+Business Media, Cambridge University Press, Oxford University Press, the BBC, and many other publishers

## **Other books in this series**

This book is a part of series of books to help non-native English-speaking researchers to communicate in English. The other titles are:

*English for Academic Research: A Guide for Teachers*

*English for Writing Research Papers*

*English for Academic Correspondence*

*English for Interacting on Campus*

*English for Academic Research: Grammar, Usage and Style*

*English for Academic Research: Grammar Exercises*

*English for Academic Research: Vocabulary Exercises*

*English for Academic Research: Writing Exercises*

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# Chapter 1

## The Importance of Presentations

### Factoids

CONFERENCE - The Latin word *ferre* (*conferre* - bring together) derives from an ancient Sanskrit word meaning to 'sustain and nourish'. So a *conference* literally means a bringing together of people for nourishing new ideas.

CONGRESS - In the Middle Ages in England a *congress* was an encounter during battle, but the original Latin word simply meant 'walking together'.

DEBATE - In ancient times to *debate* meant to *beat* or stir a mixture very vigorously so that it became less viscous. The term then came to mean to examine something in depth.

FORUM - The principle public squares in ancient Rome, where in addition to commercial activities, magistrates would judge legal cases. Today it means an organized event or meeting that encourages round-table discussions.

KEYNOTE VS PLENARY - A *keynote* is a presentation by a high profile expert, aimed at generating enthusiasm amongst the audience for the theme of the conference. Keynote is a musical term meaning the first note of the scale of any key. A *plenary* (from the Latin *plenus* meaning full) is a presentation / speech that is expected to be attended in full (i.e. by all participants).

MEETING - An informal conference. In fact *meeting* has a Germanic, rather than a Latin/Greek origin, and as with all Germanic / Anglo Saxon words it has a warmer feel denoting something more friendly (*a talk* vs *a presentation*, *chat* vs *conversation*, *speech* vs *discourse*, *welcome* vs *reception*). The original word *meet* meant to come across, find or come face to face with someone who was walking towards you.

POSTER SESSION - An alternative to an oral presentation, where research is displayed pictorially (Latin: *ponere* = to place).

PRESENTATION - To *present* originally meant to put something or someone under a person's eyes (Latin: *praesum* = I am in front).

SYMPOSIUM - A prestigious conference, with a low acceptance rate for abstracts for presentations. In ancient Greece a symposium was a drinking party (*sumpotēs* means a 'fellow drinker'). After a dinner, other guests were invited to gather round the table and discuss philosophy, politics and literary questions.

## 1.1 What's the buzz?

*A good presentation of a paper can be a delightful experience, an elegant performance, a memorable show for its audience. During the course of my scientific career I have seen thousands of presentations. Most go immediately into oblivion, but some stay in the memory for a lifetime. There's no doubt about it: good speaking skills are more important than dazzling PowerPoint slides*

Osmo Pekonen, Finnish author and mathematician

Read the quotation above and think about the answers to these questions.

1. Why is it important for you to give presentations at international conferences?
2. Is merely attending a conference (i.e. without actually presenting) useful for your career?
3. Which is more important: your slides or how you explain them?
4. What kinds of presentations do you like to see?
5. What typical faults do you notice in other people's presentations? Do you personally have the same faults?
6. Is being a good presenter an innate talent or can you learn to give better presentations?

\*\*\*\*\*

This book is designed to help you give presentations in front of international audiences, and to prove that it doesn't have to be a terrifying experience!

Three key points are worth making straight away.

- 1) Don't be obsessed by your spoken English. If you make mistakes in your English when you talk, the majority of your audience will probably not care or even notice. However, they may notice written mistakes. Don't be creative with your English. Only write what you know is correct. Generally speaking, the shorter the sentence, the less likely you are to make a mistake.

However, the less text you have, the more evident any grammar or spelling mistakes are. These final slides from three different presentations (all real) did not make a good last impression on the audience!

End

Thank!

Any question?

The presenters should have written “The end,” “Thanks,” and “Any questions?”

2) Consider having two versions of your presentation.

THE VERSION YOU SHOW TO YOUR LIVE AUDIENCE: this contains the main results with minimal detail and minimal text. This book focuses only on this version.

THE FULL VERSION: this contains more text, more details and possibly more slides. You can tell the audience at the beginning of the presentation where they can download the full version (you can include this in your title slide and / or conclusions). This means that the audience can upload your presentation onto their phone and use it as an aid to their comprehension while listening to you.

3) Consider uploading your presentation (either the 'live' one of the full one) onto your smartphone and hold it in your hand during the presentation. This solution is already acceptable in the business world and is now increasingly being found at scientific congresses. The advantages are clear: you can glance at your phone to remember where you are and what you want to say. This will considerably reduce your anxiety (see Chapter 11, 13.6 and 15.2).

This chapter analyses the benefits for you of presenting at a conference. It also identifies some of the basic differences between a good and bad presentation.

Posters are covered in Chapter 18.

## **1.2 Giving presentations gives you visibility and advances your career**

By giving a presentation at a conference, you can gain visibility and inform others of the results you have achieved. This may enable you to increase your chances of getting feedback on your work, establishing new contacts, collaborating with other research groups, and maybe of even getting more funds so that you can carry out better research.

A presentation is an opportunity to talk about factors that you probably wouldn't mention in your paper, e.g., ideas and conjectures, negative results, unfinished work—all of these might stimulate useful questions and feedback from the audience.

You will also be able to exploit the review process that takes place before the conference, and of course you can list the presentations you have given in your CV, in applications for grants, and in grant progress reports.

### **1.3 Simply attending, without presenting, is not enough**

All the networking benefits are considerably improved if you have given a presentation. You will find that people will come up to you after the presentation and ask for more details or even suggest collaborations—this means that the effort to make face-to-face contact is principally made by them not you. In any case, if you have gained visibility through a presentation, then you will find it much easier to introduce yourself to other people and begin a conversation.

### **1.4 Good presentations: typical features**

Audiences from all parts of the world appreciate presentations that:

- are professional and are delivered by someone who is credible and confident
- look like they were prepared specifically for us and make it immediately clear why we should be interested
- have clear slides, with minimal detail and helpful and/or entertaining images
- tell us interesting, curious, and counterintuitive things
- don't make us work too hard to follow what is being said—two or three main points, lots of examples, and not too much theory
- are delivered in a friendly, enthusiastic, and relatively informal way
- entertain us and interact with us

## 1.5 Bad presentations: typical features

No audience will be pleased to attend a presentation where the speaker:

- has clearly not practiced the presentation
- has no clear introduction, a confused structure, and no conclusions
- appears to be talking to himself/herself rather than engaging with the audience
- reads the slides
- has a series of similar slides full of text and diagrams
- relies on animations
- fails to address the audience's interest and only sees things from his/her point of view
- is too technical, too detailed
- speaks too fast, speaks with a monotone, speaks for too long
- shows little interest in his/her topic

## 1.6 The key to a professional presentation

A “professional” presentation is one where you put the audience first. You think about how the audience would most like to receive the information you are giving.

The key to an effective presentation is that you have a few main points that you want the audience to remember and that you highlight these points during the presentation in an interesting, and if possible, enthusiastic way.

The important thing is to be relaxed. To become more relaxed, the key is to prepare well and concentrate on the content, not on your English. Your presentation is not an English examination—your English does not have to be perfect. Be realistic and don't aim for 100% accuracy, otherwise you will be more worried about your English than about communicating the value of your research.



## Chapter 2

# TED and Learning from Others

### Factoids

TED stands for *Technology, Entertainment, Design* and was founded in 1984 as a one-off event.

TED organize conferences under the slogan "Ideas Worth Spreading".

TED originally focused on technology and design, but now the conferences include scientific, cultural, and academic topics - some very serious, some very funny.

Presenters have a maximum of 18 minutes to deliver their ideas in innovative and engaging ways, including using a story-format.

Three of the shortest TEDs, all under 3.30, are entitled: *Try something new for 30 days*; *8 secrets of success*; and *How to start a movement*.

Over 2000 talks are freely available on the website and have been watched over one billion times worldwide.

TED has become a regular word in the dictionary: *I watched two TEDs today. Did you watch that TED on ...?*

TED is watched by millions of non-native speakers who can use subtitles (in English, or their own language), or see the full transcript (again in English or their own language). TED's Open Translation Project aims to reach out to the 4.5 billion people who do not speak English. TED also has its own series of short books.

## 2.1 What's the buzz?

Think about the answers to these questions.

1. TED's mission as stated on their website is: *TED is a global community, welcoming people from every discipline and culture who seek a deeper understanding of the world. We believe passionately in the power of ideas to change attitudes, lives and, ultimately, the world. On TED.com, we're building a clearinghouse of free knowledge from the world's most inspired thinkers — and a community of curious souls to engage with ideas and each other.* How important and how achievable do you think this mission is?
2. Have you seen any TED presentations? Which ones do you like the most?
3. Are TED presentations different from the kinds of presentations you have seen at your university or at conferences in your country? Do you think it would be appropriate to use a TED-style presentation at your next conference? Why (not)?
4. Which features of TED do you use? Have you ever tried the 'surprise me' feature or used the playlists?
5. Do you watch in English? With or without subtitles?
6. Have you ever based your own presentations on the style and/or structure of a TED presentation?
7. How can you use TED to improve your speaking style and pronunciation?
8. Is it possible to learn from others? Do we tend to be blind to our own mistakes?

\*\*\*\*\*

This chapter discusses the benefits of TED by analysing some typical TED presentations. It also provides checklists to enable you to assess the slides and presentation styles of various presenters (not just TED presenters, but your colleagues too, and of course yourself).

You can access TED from your computer or by downloading the TED app onto your smartphone.

Most of what is said in this chapter will make much more sense if you actually watch the TED presentations in subsections [2.3-2.6](#).

In addition to TED, there are several sites on the Web dedicated to presentations. There are some where you can share slides, for example:

slideshare.net  
 mypick.com  
 authorstream.com/slideshows/

These sites are useful for seeing how other people in similar fields to yours create their slides. Examining these presentations should help you to understand that packing a presentation full of detail is not usually a good approach.

## 2.2 Choosing a TED presentation and learning the benefits

You can choose the topic of the presentations you want to watch by using TED's search engine, and you can also choose whether to have English subtitles on or not. The subtitles report every single word, and are particularly useful for seeing (not just hearing) how many words a presenter uses in a sentence. This highlights that the shorter the sentence is, the easier it is for the presenter to say, and the easier it is for the audience to understand.

You can see or download a full transcript (called 'interactive transcript') of the presentation in English, plus translations in several other languages. This means that you can note down any useful phrases that the speaker uses that you think you could use too.

By reading the transcript and listening to the presentation at the same time, you can also improve your pronunciation and intonation by trying to imitate the presenter.

A good TED presentation to start with is Jay Walker's *English Mania* (19.5). Jay's talk highlights how preparation, and speaking clearly and slowly in very short sentences, are key to a good presentation. This presentation is less than five minutes long and is easy to follow even without subtitles!

## 2.3 TED example with use of slides: *Let's bridge the digital divide!*

You may be concerned that many of the presentations you watch on TED are given by very dynamic presenters. Economist Aleph Molinari in his presentation *Let's bridge the digital divide!* is not dynamic, he doesn't run around the stage entertaining us. But he does know how to inform us and how to bring important data to our attention, which is all you need to give a good presentation at an international conference. For another example of a good but not particularly dynamic presenter see Jay Walker (19.5).

In his presentation, Aleph Molinari tells us that five billion people don't have access to the Internet and then explains what we should do about it. This presentation may seem rather dated when you watch it, so concentrate not on the statistics themselves but on how Molinari presents these statistics.

### EXAMPLES AND STATISTICS

Aleph immediately starts with concrete examples of victims of the digital divide. He then moves on to some statistics. He shows a slide with the number of people in the world: 6,930,055,154.

Why not 7bn? Because the length and exactness of the number emphasizes firstly the incredible number of people who live on our planet and at the same time that they are individuals. The long number also looks dramatic on the screen. But when he actually mentions the number verbally he says "nearly seven billion people" - there would be no point in reading the exact number. He then gives the number of people who are digitally included, which on the slide appears as 2,095,006,005. What he says is "Out of these, approximately two billion are digitally included, this is approximately 30% of the entire world population, which means that the remaining 70% of the world, close to five billion people, do not have access to a computer or the Internet .. five billion people, that's four times the population of India".

Aleph's technique is thus to:

1. show a statistic in a simple clear way (i.e. not along with several other distracting statistics)
2. talk about the statistic in three ways (first as a whole number, then as a percentage, then by comparison with India). Aleph thus offers his audience different ways of absorbing the information, his aim being to help them to really understand the true significance of the numbers involved
3. interpret the statistic by saying what the implications are

#### TEXT, BACKGROUNDS AND FONTS

Aleph's slides have a black background with a yellow font. They are incredibly clear. The majority of his slides that contain text only have one or two words. The slide with the most text, which is his first slide and contains a definition of the digital divide, contains 19 words. At least half his slides are just photographs, which support his speech. Essentially, the information contained on each of his slides can be absorbed in less than two seconds. This means that all the audience can listen to him with 100% of their concentration, rather than some of the audience reading the slides and some listening to him.

#### ALEPH'S PRESENTING STYLE

I may be wrong, but I imagine that Aleph is quite introverted. This reveals itself in the fact that he spends too much time (in my opinion) looking at the screen rather than the audience. Although he does try to emphasize his key words, his voice is rather monotonous. The combination of these two factors could lead to the audience losing interest.

However, Aleph compensates for this lack of dynamism by

- having a clear logical structure
- having excellent slides - clear, easy to follow
- being professional

This makes him very credible in the audience's eyes. They will certainly be motivated to follow him and listen to what he has to say. And this also means that although his conclusion in itself lacks impact (his voice does not sound very impassioned), as a whole his presentation will have a positive impact because he appears to the audience as being totally committed to his project and also very sincere.

## 2.4 TED example with minimal slides, delivered from a lectern: *The forgotten history of autism*

The TED website introduces this presentation as follows:

Decades ago, few pediatricians had heard of autism. In 1975, 1 in 5,000 kids was estimated to have it. Today, 1 in 68 is on the autism spectrum. What caused this steep rise? Steve Silberman points to “a perfect storm of autism awareness” — a pair of psychologists with an accepting view, an unexpected pop culture moment and a new clinical test. But to really understand, we have to go back further to an Austrian doctor by the name of Hans Asperger, who published a pioneering paper in 1944. Because it was buried in time, autism has been shrouded in misunderstanding ever since.

This presentation contains only four slides - one graph and three photos.

### FULLY WRITTEN SPEECH

Steve is speaking from a lectern upon which he has his full speech. He looks down frequently (but very rapidly) to remind himself what to say next. If someone on TED can rely on looking at their written speech, then so can you. A better option however, may be just to have notes (see [19.5](#), and also see [13.6](#) and [15.2](#) on how to use your smartphone).

### STRUCTURE

There is a clear logical structure - i) introduction to the issue of autism, ii) how and where misconceptions arose, iii) how these misconceptions were overcome, and iv) finally the positive aspects of autism and the key contribution of having a diversity of brainpowers in our society.

## EYE CONTACT

Notice how Steve looks at one section of the audience for a few seconds, and then turns his head to look at another section. Maintaining eye contact is essential to maintaining audience attention.

## GRAPH

Steve only uses one graph. Note how the information on the graph is extremely simple to absorb very quickly.

## BODY LANGUAGE

When you are standing at a lectern there is less opportunity to use your body. However Steve makes great use of his hands to emphasize points (see at 4.0, 5.45, 7.23, 12.32 minutes)

## VOICE

When reading from a prepared script, there is a danger of adopting a monotone. Note how Steve modulates his voice to give emphasis and raise the audience's interest in specific points.

## **2.5 What might Steve have done differently if he had been giving a more formal version of his talk at an international conference made up of a multilingual audience?**

I think he would simply have used more slides for the following:

**STATISTICS:** He mentions a number of statistics. Given that numbers can be quite difficult to process by speakers of another language, and given that some English numbers can create confusion (e.g. *thirteen* vs *thirty*), having the numbers on a slide is useful.

**MORE PHOTOS:** He mentions the famous movie *Rain Man* starring Dustin Hoffman. It might have been useful to see a photo of the movie poster. There is a chance that the audience knows the name of the film in a translated version and may pronounce Dustin Hoffman in a very different way. This means that they may miss the point.

**QUOTATIONS:** He quotes from many people and it might have been helpful for the audience (as well as creating variety) to have seen these quotes on a slide - after all his quotes were well chosen as they were all very concise.