ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC RESEARCH

Adrian Wallwork

Giving an Academic Presentation in English

Intermediate Level

Springer

English for Academic Research

Series Editor
Adrian Wallwork, English for Academics SAS
Pisa, Italy

This series aims to help non-native, English-speaking researchers communicate in English. The books are designed like manuals or user guides to help readers find relevant information quickly, and assimilate it rapidly and effectively.

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Introduction

WHO FOR

- Intermediate to upper intermediate students of academic English
- EAP teachers

TYPE

Self-study guide for students, as well as the basis for a course on academic English.

STRUCTURE OF BOOK

Each chapter covers a specific area of giving presentations, from preparing a script and slides, to giving the presentation (online or at a traditional conference).

STRUCTURE OF CHAPTERS

Each chapter is made up of a series of sections. Most sections begin with a series of questions to get students thinking about the big picture of a specific area of presenting or communicating in general. Then there are explanations and key tips, as well as a series of short exercises.

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Chapter 1
The key aims of a presentation

1.1 What skills do I need to be an academic? How do these relate to presentation skills?

1. What skills do you need to be an academic today?
2. Are these skills different from those of 20-30 years ago? If so, how?
3. What skills do you already have? Which ones do you think you still need to learn? Why?

Some academics tend to be highly competitive, non-collaborative (i.e. not very interested in sharing results), and focused on publishing or presenting as many papers as possible (i.e. bibliometric indicators). Other aspects of academic life, such as teaching and solving the problems of society, are given low priority as they are considered as being unproductive because they don't further an academic's career.

However, there is also a trend towards more open science and more open data infrastructures. Thus it is now considered important to conduct research that

- enables others to collaborate and contribute
- encourages the free availability of data, procedures, protocols etc, so that results can be replicated, re-used and redistributed
- has a clear goal, i.e. is mission-oriented
- will benefit society in general, i.e. will not just be of interest to a small group of researchers

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1.1 What skills do I need to be an academic? How do these relate to presentation skills? (cont.)

This means that you will need to learn more about how to communicate your results clearly and to collaborate with others. Such communication skills involve:

- being open-minded and flexible, with an ability to debate constructively
- developing relationships with your local community and with the community of scientists
- coordinating projects

Obviously, you still need to show excellence and rigor in your research. But no matter how good your results are, if you cannot communicate them well (orally or written), they will have little real value. If you want a successful and rewarding career you need to learn to present well – and this book will teach you how!

Audiences at conferences need to see the VALUE of your work easily and quickly.

Being an academic, you probably don't spend much time thinking about market and commercial forces. However, your job at a presentation is to inform and possibly 'persuade' your audience. If they 'buy' these ideas, i.e. if they can see the clear value of what you are saying, then you are more likely to have a successful career.

One of the PhD students who attended my class on scientific communication in English was studying dark matter, i.e. material that we can't see but seems likely to exist in space. Her research involves highly complex mathematical calculations. Her presentations were very dry and she seemed to be talking to a very small audience of other physicists like herself. The result was that other students in her course showed minimal interest in what she was saying. However, after the course she emailed me the message below. I have highlighted the most relevant points in italics.

> *After your suggestions, I recorded myself many times on Zoom to practice saying my script in a more enthusiastic way*. I also showed the YouTube recording of my presentation to friends and colleagues for *more feedback*. I'll continue to think of making *my topic more relatable to any audience*, it's a very useful idea. It has also *helped me to think of what I am doing as more than just a calculation*.

She had thus understood the importance of showing her passion for her research, of sharing her work (including her presentations) with colleagues in order to hear their opinions, and to see her research as having a wider scope than just dealing with very large numbers.

1.2 How important are presentation skills?

- Why is it important to give presentations at international conferences?
- Executives in industry often consider communication skills to be more relevant than technical skills. Why do you think this is? Do you think that also university professors consider communication skills to be so important? Why (not)?

Below is a list of the benefits of giving a presentation. Which three are the most important for you personally?

1. Exploit the review process that takes place before the conference. (When you submit an abstract of a presentation for a conference, you will generally receive feedback from the conference reviewers).
2. Travel to interesting places (when no virus restrictions are in place!).
3. Gain visibility– helps you to increase your chances of establishing new contacts, collaborating with other research groups, and getting more funds.
4. Network and meet up with old friends, colleagues and people who - until now - you may have only contacted via email or Zoom.
5. Get new ideas while listening and talking to other people, and find out what the hot topics are and what other researchers are working on.
6. Encourage the audience to read your paper on the same topic.
7. Talk about things that you probably wouldn't mention in your paper, e.g. ideas and hypotheses, negative results, unfinished work - all of these might stimulate useful questions and feedback from the audience.
8. Include a reference to a presentation you have made in your CV and in applications for grants.
9. Prepare yourself for a career in industry - in the future, if you work for a company you will certainly have to give presentations for products and services, proposals, and progress reports.

If you give a good informative and entertaining presentation people will:

1. be interested in what you do and want to learn more
2. may be interested in collaborating with you
3. may invite you to their university
4. may give you funds to continue your research

1.3 What do you dislike about other people's presentations?

Make a list of five things about other people's presentations that you don't like.

Compare your answers with the key. Which factors listed in the key were not things that you thought of? How important are they?

1. Lack of preparation and practice
2. No eye contact with audience
3. No clear structure / No clear message
4. Too much text – hard to find key info
5. No images
6. Presenter reads the text / Monotone voice
7. Too long + too many technical details
8. Too many animations
9. Too small fonts, bad use of color
10. No match between speech and slides
11. No real conclusion or call for action
12. ONLINE: slow at uploading presentation, eyes down, big headphones, background noise, strange virtual background, obviously reading speech

1.4 What makes a good presentation?

Below are eight key skills needed to make a good presentation.

Which skills do you:

a) already have?

b) want to learn?

c) think are not particularly relevant?

1. Captivating introduction: immediately connects with the audience
2. Clear description of problem + goal + results
3. Clear slides: essential info that audience can understand and absorb quickly
4. Clear message: nothing difficult to understand - audience feels positive
5. Delivery and tone: passionate, convincing, interesting, enthusiastic, and confident
6. Speech: normal voice (not in 'presentation mode'), not fast, with frequent pauses
7. Authentic: transparent about limitations; not worried about seeming vulnerable
8. Memorable: audience remembers you as a person (not just what you said), so that they will be encouraged to contact you, keep in touch, and possibly collaborate

In order to demonstrate the skills listed above and deliver a good presentation, it is ESSENTIAL that you really understand:

- why you chose your specific research – what problem you are trying to solve and why
- why this research is important to you and why you find it interesting
- why it is important to tell other people about your research
- what would happen if NO ONE did your research

Write answers to at least two of the points above. Think very carefully before you start writing.

1.5 What are your fears of giving presentations (in English)?

One in four Americans are afraid of speaking in public. Are you? Why?

Which three of the eight 'fears' listed below are you most afraid of?

1. Being center of attention
2. Being judged – feeling stupid compared to profs in audience
3. Losing track
4. Not feeling prepared
5. Not being clear or understood
6. Getting + keeping audience attention
7. English (pronunciation + grammar)
8. Q & A session

What can you do to overcome the eight fears listed above?

See the key for some practical solutions.

The key factor is to enjoy yourself. If you enjoy yourself you will automatically give an engaging presentation. To enjoy yourself you need to know why you find your research interesting and why it is important to tell others about it. If you don't know why, you will NEVER give a good presentation.

If you are new to presenting, try practicing in low-risk situations, for example internal presentations in front of colleagues.

If you do not like being the center of attention, then try to overcome this fear by gradually building up your confidence by:

- offering to teach undergraduates – this is a great way to learn presentation skills and to become at ease at talking to a big group of people
- participating more actively in meetings, e.g. voicing your opinion rather than remaining silent
- taking part in activities outside work such as team sports, acting clubs, speakers' clubs
- beginning conversations with strangers on buses, trains and planes

1.5 What are your fears of giving presentations (in English)? (cont.)

Solutions to fears

1. Practice being the center of attention in your everyday life. With family, friends, colleagues try not to be the one who stays silent. Instead, talk more. Prepare in advance things that you can say to people. Take up hobbies that put you at the center of attention: acting, dancing, playing music etc
2. Your professors were once PhD students. They know how you are feeling. With a few exceptions, the audience is always on your side, they want you to do well, they are not judging you. Sometimes there are professors and senior researchers in the audience. They may be looking for new people to join their research team. They may want to see how well you express yourself and communicate, even if your presentation is not brilliant.
3. When you are NOT doing an online presentation, you can hold written notes in your hand or upload your presentation onto your phone so that you can look at it while giving your presentation.
4. You have no excuse for not feeling prepared or not being clear. You must practice practice practice practice practice practice practice practice.
5. Same as 4.
6. Use a personal story, an interesting counterintuitive statistic, a question, a video. Do NOT simply introduce yourself and your topic.
7. Use Google Translate (or other applications) for the pronunciation – see 4.4. Have a few individual lessons with an English teacher to practice your speech and giving the presentation.
8. Get family and friends and colleagues to ask you as many questions as possible. Note down the questions and, if possible, have the answers integrated into your slides. In any case prepare answers for all the questions. This will also increase the chances of you hearing the question during the Q&A. Arrange with a colleague or friendly person that you have met at the conference to ask you the first question. If you don't understand a question, admit it. Say "I'm sorry, I am not sure if I have understood the question. Could you ask me again during the coffee break"? See Chapter 11.

1.6 How important are first impressions?

1. How fast do you think professional recruiters judge a CV?
2. How quickly do you think you form an impression of another person?
3. How important is the impression you give in the first seconds of your presentation?

1) 6 seconds!
2) 4-10 seconds.
3) Very. If you make a good first impression the audience are more likely to i) watch your presentation with attention; ii) forgive you if you make mistakes or if they don't always understand exactly what you are saying.

A good first impression tends to be a lasting impression. This means that you will have to do a lot of negative things to make the person re-evaluate their initial positive impression.

This doesn't mean that if you are very nervous at the beginning of your presentation and make, for example, mistakes with your English, that the audience will have a terrible impression and stop listening to you. It simply means that you will have to compensate by having good clear slides, by giving interesting and pertinent information etc.

1.6 How important are first impressions? (cont.)

To learn more about how quickly you form an impression of someone, watch 30-60 seconds of the four conference presentations below. They are just a random selection.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ovH2LLuR_Zc

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F7jehSHLpK8

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k588C2dMLCY

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8WB0OIM5RlE

Don't worry about the topic or whether you understand what they are saying. Just think about your impression of the presenter. The questions below are designed to help you formulate your impression.

1. Do they look competent and professional?
2. If you knew all the terminology, do you think you would be able to follow what they are saying?
3. Would you like to meet them?
4. Which presenter gave you the best impression? Why?
5. What have you learned from this exercise? How could you improve the first impression that others have of you?

1.7 What makes a presentation memorable?

Why do you remember some presentations and instantly forget others?

Below are links to four presentations (but you can search for others if you want):

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HrnTZND1a_0&t=97s

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RfoF2SCboJ0

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7FfKaIgArJ8&t=20s

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XrflFPDbD98

Watch two or three minutes of each presentation, or more if you find the presentation interesting.

Wait for a day to pass before answering the four questions below.

1. Which presentation do you remember the most in terms of the impression it had on you?
2. Write down three things that you remember about each presentation in terms of statistics, information and general content.
3. Watch the presentations again. How much of the information had you forgotten?
4. What have you learned from this experience?

When we think about the presentations we have seen, what we often remember is the presenter rather than what he/she presented.

We remember whether

- we liked the presenter as a person – they were friendly, approachable, not too slick (i.e. not perfect)
- we understood what they were saying, i.e. they didn't speak too quickly and the concepts were not too difficult to grasp
- we found their delivery/technique effective e.g. they managed to attract and keep our attention through telling their story, through an interesting or counter-intuitive statistic, by asking us a question that we could personally relate to
- they explained things easily without taxing our brains
- we continued to think about the presentation after the presentation had finished

1.7 What makes a presentation memorable? (cont.)

Often what we remember is not WHAT information the presenter gave us, but more HOW we were given the information and whether we liked the person WHO gave us the information.

Consequently, the main aim of your presentation is not merely to give information, but above all to be MEMORABLE.

If your presentation is memorable, people will want to meet you (during the coffee break, at the social dinner, at future conferences), contact you, read your paper, and collaborate with you.

If they collaborate with you, then you will increase your chances of getting funds for your research.

> The main aim of a presentation is that you and your presentation are memorable. You make the audience interested in you and your work to the extent that they want to collaborate in some way.

1.8 How different from a scientific/technical presentation is a presentation given by a humanities/arts student?

This subsection is for those readers/students are who are studying for example, literature, history, political/social sciences, or anthropology.

Read the difference between the natural sciences and humanities in this definition from Wikipedia:

> The natural sciences seek to derive general laws through reproducible and verifiable experiments. The humanities generally study local traditions, through their history, literature, music, and arts, with an emphasis on understanding particular individuals, events, or eras. (Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Humanities)

Does this difference mean that not all the guidelines mentioned so far in this section (and the rest of this book) do not necessarily apply to presentations given by humanities students?

For example, is it acceptable for humanities students:

1. to give presentations that are predominantly text-based and contain few images?
2. not to justify why they do their research and therefore avoid any practical relevance of their research to current world problems?