

# English for Presentations at International Conferences

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 Springer

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# Preface

## Who Is This Book for?

This book is a guide to writing and giving presentations. It is mainly intended for non-native speakers of English of all disciplines who want to present the results of their research at international conferences. 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. Some chapters have “Advanced Tips” for more experienced presenters.

I hope that other trainers like myself in English for Academic Purposes will also find the book a source of useful ideas to pass on to students.

Note: Most of the examples given are from real presentations, but in some cases they are fictitious and may contain invented statistics.

## What Will I Learn from This Book?

This book will help you to

- 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

## 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.

If you have never done a presentation before, then you should start by reading the rest of this chapter. If you have done presentations before, but have problems with pronunciation or still suffer from nerves, then you could start at [Chapters 3 and 4](#), respectively. Are you not so good at planning and practicing? Then read all of Part I. If you tend to write too much text in your slides or have difficulty explaining them, then read Part II. Finally, if you want to know what to say at each stage of a presentation then go directly to Part III.

You may find that occasionally the same concept is explained more than once but in different sections. This is because the book is not designed to be read from cover to cover, and some concepts apply to more than one area of preparing and delivering a presentation.

## Other Books in This Series

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

English for Writing Research Papers  
English for Academic Correspondence and Socializing  
English for Research: Usage, Style, and Grammar

## Why Do a Presentation at a Conference?

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 include the presentation you have made in your CV, in applications for grants, and in grant progress reports.

## **Isn't Just Attending a Conference Enough, Why Is It a Good Thing to Give a Presentation?**

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.

## **What Kind of Presentations Do Audiences Like to See?**

We tend to like 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

## **What Constitutes 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.

## What Kind of Presentations Do Audiences NOT Like to See?

We tend NOT to like presentations 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

## What About Posters?

A poster is a good alternative to a presentation, particularly if you feel worried about standing up in front of a large audience or if your English is very low level. This book does not cover posters specifically. However you will find useful writing rules in [Chapter 2](#), pronunciation rules in [Chapter 3](#), suggestions on how to answer questions in [Chapter 16](#), and useful phrases in [Chapter 17](#). Links to websites on the design and layout of posters can be found in “Links and References.”

For suggestions on how to write in a concise and readable way see the companion volume: *English for Writing Research Papers*

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# Part I

## Preparation and Practice

*Ninety per cent or more of preparation is typically devoted to content. Countless hours go into creating and fine-tuning the presentation materials, and whatever time there is left over—if there is any time left over—is reserved for practice. Yet how you practice can literally make or break your presentation. Keep in mind that a lot of presentations die on the vine [i.e. are not effective at all] because they aren't rehearsed properly, or they're never rehearsed at all.*

Jeffrey Jacobi

# Chapter 1

## Ten Stages in Preparing Your Slides

You will learn how to

- plan your preparation
- begin your preparation by focusing on what you want to say rather than immediately creating the slides

Why is this important?

If you don't rehearse (i.e., practice) it is very unlikely that you will give a good presentation and you will thus waste a perfect opportunity for promoting your research and for setting up collaborations.

---



Below are 10 stages in preparing a presentation that you can follow.

Note that there are seven stages before you create your slides. It is generally best to first decide what to say, and then use that as a basis for creating your slides. Often, people who begin by preparing the slides

- find that they spend so much time on the slides that they don't have time to practice. But the success of your presentation very much depends on how much you prepare and practice
- don't think about what it is that they really want to say, so their slides then dictate what they will tell the audience. It is a much better strategy if your slides reflect and support what you want to say
- create some slides that they subsequently find are not needed, and thus waste valuable preparation time

Realistically, you may not have time to do all the stages suggested below, but try to

- focus on only transmitting three key points (see [Section 1.2](#))
- think about your structure by answering the questions in [Section 1.5](#)
- minimize the number of slides and the amount of text on those slides
- write down your beginning and ending. Practice them as much as you can (on the plane, in the bath, wherever)
- learn the correct pronunciation of key words

## 1.1 Find out about the potential audience

It is very useful to find out how much the audience already know about your topic. If you are too technical you may alienate those who are potentially interested in the topic but are not experts. However, if you are too general you will bore the experts.

Here are some ways to find out about the audience:

1. If the conference is organized so that attendees sign up in advance for the talks they are going to attend, then you should be able to ask the organizers to give you a list of probable attendees at your talk. Go through this list carefully. You can Google them and also see if there are any names of people who have appeared in any bibliographies of your own or similar papers—this will help you to see how many experts there are.
2. The list of attendees to your talk may also help you to understand what nationality they are. If there are a lot of native English speakers, then at the question and answer session you might need to explain that you are not a native speaker yourself and ask them to speak slowly and clearly. Similarly, if there is a disproportionate number of non-native speakers, then you may need to talk more slowly.

3. Look at the titles of the other talks. This should give you an indication of what the audience may be interested in.
4. If your talk is late in the schedule, go to as many of the earlier talks as possible to judge the possible level of the audience's interest in your topic. Then you can make a few adjustments to make it more, or less, technical as appropriate.

You are likely to have a mixed audience, so don't make too many assumptions about what they may and may not know (unless you managed to understand this by doing point 4 above). You thus need to find the right balance and prepare extra slides that you can use to tailor your presentation to the specific audience.

## 1.2 Identify your key points/messages

Write down what you think are the most important/interesting aspects of your research that you want to communicate to your audience.

Try to limit the number of your important points (hereafter, key points) to about three or four, as this is the number that experts have proved is what most audiences can realistically remember. By not trying to cover everything but limiting yourself just to certain aspects, your presentation will have a clear focus. This does not mean that you only mention these key points and nothing else. Instead, it means that you mention them in your introduction and in your conclusions, and you give them the most space while describing your methodology and/or your results.

This process is a little similar to writing an abstract for a paper, which acts as both a summary and an advertisement of your work. It may help you to think that there might be journal editors and reviewers in the audience and that your objective is to give them the highlights of your research so that they will be interested in publishing your work in a video version of their journal.

Your key points should generally indicate what makes your research stand out (i.e., why your community should be interested) and how it contributes to knowledge in your field. The key points could be, for example,

- what problem you wanted to resolve/investigate and why this was important for the scientific community
- how you did it (your methodology)
- what success you had (your results)

Alternatively, perhaps the problem you wanted to solve is well known (and thus doesn't merit much description), but your methodology is highly innovative. In this case your three main points may be connected with how your method works, or how you selected your data.

Or maybe your methodology is not important, but your results are. Thus your three important points could simply be your three most important findings, or your one important finding has three important implications.