

Preparing and Delivering Scientific Presentations

A Complete Guide for International Medical Scientists

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Chapter 2 Preparing a Talk

Introduction

The importance of proper preparation cannot be exaggerated. Whether you have agreed to speak for five minutes or five hours, you can be sure that the time you actually spend delivering your presentation to your audience will only be a very small fraction of the time that goes into your talk. It takes a lot of time and effort to create a good presentation, and you will probably discover that your ideas will evolve as you work on your talk. Because the most important aspect of any scientific communication is the ideas it aims to convey, the most important tasks are deciding what to include (and what to leave out) and how to organize the information you want to communicate. Next in importance comes the preparation of the slides that will serve as the guide to your talk – both for you and for your audience. Finally, you can improve your delivery by rehearsing assiduously. Just as your ideas will evolve as you work on your talk, working on your delivery will allow you to discover the strengths and weaknesses of your talk. Thorough preparation is the key to success.

This chapter will give you a few tips on researching, organizing your ideas, creating your slides, and rehearsing for your presentation.

Before You Start

There are a couple issues that you should consider as soon as possible after agreeing to do a talk. You should adjust the style and length of your talk to fit both the type of presentation you are expected to give and the time slot when you are expected to give it.

Types of Presentations

Broadly speaking, whenever you speak in front of an audience you are “presenting”. In this sense, a scientific presentation could range from something as short and simple as asking a question from the audience at a conference to forming

part of an expert panel discussing controversial issues in a particular field. Here we briefly discuss the most common kinds of presentations.

1. *Questions to the lecturer from the audience (mini-presentations)*

Asking a question from the audience at an international congress is a great way to make your debut in the international scientific forum. This experience can help you get over your shyness and prepare you for the day when you will step behind the podium. The question and comments session after a presentation provides you with the opportunity to give a “mini-presentation” without the pressure of having an official role as a speaker.

Although native English speakers can formulate questions off the top of their heads, understanding a lecture and asking a question can be a great challenge for those who are less proficient in the language. Thus it is important to prepare thoroughly if you are going to ask a question. Choose a topic you know well, and read up on it prior to entering the lecture hall. Take notes during the presentation. Design your question in advance. Try to ask a good question on the topic of the lecture with a short introduction so that you are exposed to the audience a bit longer than usual. Do not ask a very short question.

Bear in mind that the very purpose of your question is not the question itself: although neither the lecturer nor the audience will notice it, you are simply gaining experience speaking English in public and learning to overcome stage-fright. Rehearse your question mentally before raising your hand and asking for the microphone.

“Mini-presentations” have a certain protocol. First, you should introduce yourself concisely, stating your name, your hospital, and your country. Then, you should thank the lecturer and praise his or her presentation. Then ask your question. Do not make your point on the topic of the presentation.

A few practical tips:

Being heard. Make sure that the microphone is not so close to your mouth that the audience can hear you breathing and that it is not so far away that the audience cannot hear you at all.

If the microphone is on a base, do not touch it. If you are given a wireless microphone, do not forget to grab it with both hands because trembling – not only of your hands but of your voice – is quite likely in your very first question in public.

Speak up: many beginners speak so softly that neither the lecturer nor the audience can hear them. If your question cannot be heard, it cannot be understood. The panel will ask you to repeat your question and this could make you even more nervous. So, speak a little louder than usual to ensure that everybody can hear you and understand you.

Debating the lecturer. One of the main reasons most non-native English speaking members of the audience do not ask questions is the fear of entering into a debate with the lecturer. However, this is an unfounded fear. Unless you are a prominent figure in the scientific community, it is unlikely that experts will be interested in your opinion about the topic of your question. They will simply

answer and proceed to the next question. Remember that, as a general rule, scientific sessions are always behind schedule. Therefore, it is less likely that you will have to respond to the lecturer's answer to your question if you ask the last question in a series of queries than if you ask the first one, simply because the session will be running out of time. See Chap. 3 for an example of a mini-presentation and useful language in this context.

2. *Scientific reports session*

At most conferences, there are several “scientific sessions” in which six or more papers related to a particular area of research are presented in 60 to 90 minutes. In most cases, each speaker presents an overview of a single study in a short talk (the time limit for such presentations ranges from 6 to 10 minutes with an additional 3 to 5 minutes for questions). These sessions are presided over by one or more chairpersons, who introduce speakers and their topics, and oversee the question and answer period. In this type of presentation, it is crucial to stay focused on your particular topic and exclude any information that is not absolutely essential for listeners to get the gist of your study. Most beginners fail by wanting to explain too much – the format does not allow for extensive background information, and the introduction must be very brief. Most general comments can be omitted altogether – it is common (and boring) for a well-versed audience to hear six speakers say something like “breast cancer is the second most common cancer in women”. In this kind of talk, it is important to get to the results section quickly. Unless the topic of your paper itself is an innovative new approach to investigating a particular topic, it is the results and their implications that you and your audience will be most interested in. Be sure to leave ample time to go over your conclusions thoroughly.

3. *Symposium*

Like scientific reports sessions, symposia comprise a series of oral presentations with related content. In this case, however, there tends to be a more extensive examination of a single topic than in scientific paper sessions. A symposium will often include fewer (and longer) talks, and speakers' topics will be assigned by the organizers. Ideally, the speakers will have communicated with each other before preparing their talks to ensure that they fit together well and do not overlap excessively. The chairpersons' comments should help to integrate talks, and a discussion among the speakers might be scheduled for after the presentation.

4. *Invited address*

Invited addresses tend to be longer, typically lasting 20 to 60 minutes. In these talks, the speakers might discuss a specific area of research, summarizing and integrating information from several studies. Apart from describing what is known about the topic and discussing research that is currently underway, the speaker might also go into future directions for research.

One special kind of invited address is the *refresher course*. These are intended to review basic concepts about a topic as well as to bring the audience up to date about new developments in the field. In this kind of talk, it is important to

remember that many of the attendees will have little or no knowledge of your talk, so you will have to include a thorough introduction.

Slots

Another important aspect to consider before designing your presentation is the time slot you have been assigned, in other words, when you are scheduled to give your talk. Unfortunately, this information is not always available early enough for you to take full advantage of it.

If possible, it can be very helpful to obtain a copy of the program for the event you will be participating in to find out the answers to the following questions:

- When are you talking? Which is your slot?
- Who is presenting a paper before you?
- Who is presenting a paper after you?
- Who is who and who are you in the context of the course?

Certain time slots entail special circumstances that must be taken into account. Knowing about them will help keep them from undermining your confidence.

If you are responsible for the *first talk in a course or session*, you might consider shortening your talk by five minutes. Even in the best organized events, it is not uncommon for the event to start five minutes late. Whenever you start, be aware that some attendees will show up late. Do not make any comments about this and, above all, do not let it affect your concentration.

If you are the *last talk in the course or session*, you can also shorten your presentation considerably. Despite the chairperson's best efforts, sessions inevitably get behind schedule. Accept the fact that many congress attendees will not show up and some will probably leave in the middle of your talk. Again, you should not make any comments about this and make sure it does not affect your concentration or interrupt the flow of your presentation. The remaining audience is likely to be tired and looking forward to wrapping up, so let them know in your introduction that the presentation has been shortened and you will be finishing shortly – they will appreciate it.

If you are *scheduled to speak just after lunch*, use your knowledge of physiology to your advantage. Have a frugal lunch to prevent a large proportion of your blood from going to the portal system – you will need the full supply of blood to your brain! Remember that the audience will probably have indulged themselves more than you have, and some of them will probably fall asleep during your talk. Do not take this personally, it is merely a question of cerebral hypoperfusion and does not warrant any comment, unless they snore loudly and disrupt your presentation. On the other hand, you should do your best to make your presentation more interesting to keep their attention. In particular, speak a little louder than usual and avoid talking in a monotone.

If you are *scheduled to talk just after the “star” of the program*, in your introduction you should praise the speaker before you and make a humble statement

about the content of your own talk. “I’m afraid it will be difficult to arouse your interest in what I have to say after that outstanding presentation by Dr. Foreman” or “I certainly enjoyed Dr. Foreman’s outstanding presentation. It is an honor to speak after her, although I’m obviously in another league, I hope I can keep your interest.” “That certainly is a tough act to follow, but I will do my best not to bore you”. In this situation, it is also probably a good idea to shorten your talk. Again, you must accept the fact that many people will leave the room before your talk or just as you are getting underway. Do not let this disturb you and do not comment on it.

If you are *scheduled to talk just before the “star” of the program*, you might also comment in your introduction that you have been given a bad time slot. Something like “The only advantage of speaking before Dr. Harrison is that I have a reserved seat in the very first row after my presentation.” You might also shorten your talk a bit and mention that you are going to be as brief as possible, because you, like everyone else, are looking forward to hearing what the star has to say. Accept the fact that many attendees will enter the room in the middle of your talk and do not make any comments about it or let it undermine your confidence.

If *your talk is the star attraction of the conference*, you are under a lot of pressure to perform. However, if you find yourself in this position, you will probably have earned this right after many successful publications and you will probably be used to giving presentations in English. In any case, be sure to enjoy yourself and see to it that the audience enjoys themselves too. Keep the number of slides to a minimum and do not get bogged down in details. Focus on fundamental concepts; the attendees are looking forward to grasping your overall vision of the topic, not minor details that one of your associates could convey. Take full advantage of this opportunity to sell the best possible image of yourself. Invite the audience to send you their feedback and participate in your research projects, you might be surprised how many will take you up on the offer.

Research

The preliminary work for the presentation of a paper is extensively covered in the literature and is outside the scope of this guide. Here, we just want to mention a few practices that are especially helpful for non-native-English speakers preparing a presentation in English.

Gathering Information

When you gather information for a presentation that will be delivered in English, you should concentrate on English-language sources. Every bit of information (vocabulary, expressions, and ways of commenting on details about your topic) that you have acquired in English is an invaluable resource that can be used in

many different ways. If you follow this simple advice, it will be much easier for you to talk about a specific topic in English in public.

Reading from Articles... Aloud

This is a very useful step in the preparation of any presentation in English. You will surely read many articles and book chapters when you are researching your talk. Naturally, you will focus on the contents, but do not pass up the opportunity to practice the pronunciation of the words and sentences you will need to deliver your talk. Many pronunciation mistakes can easily be avoided if you read aloud from the articles you use to prepare the presentation. Reading scientific literature aloud is a good way to identify and subsequently avoid pronunciation mistakes during the delivery of a scientific paper.

Audiovisual Research

Physicians working in academic environments will be familiar with the basics of online and library searches of the written literature. But did you also know that the internet contains a wealth of audiovisual material related to specific medical problems? Two general innovations are of special interest. The first, podcasting, allows you to download audio files to your computer or iPod. You can find relevant podcasts by typing “podcast”, “webcast”, “vodcast”, or “webinar” and a relevant search term, for example “bronchiectasis” into a search engine (e.g. Google, Yahoo!). You will be surprised how many hits you get. The second innovation is online video. Searching is as easy as selecting “video search” in your search engine and entering relevant search terms.

While you are unlikely to find actual sources of information for your presentation in this format, there is a very good chance that you will find material that will be of incalculable value from the linguistic viewpoint because it will give you the chance to listen many of the terms and expressions you will need to say in your talk. Both audio and video files can be downloaded to your MP3 or MP4 player, so you can listen or watch whenever and wherever you like.

Finally, you can watch many scientific presentations on the internet – doing so will help you to appreciate different aspects of presentations outlined in this book that you need to work on. Appendix 6 lists some useful internet resources that will help you research the language you need for presentations as well as improve your presentation skills and general and medical English.

Discussing the Topic of Your Presentation

From the very moment you decide to present a paper in English, you should seize any opportunity to talk about the topic of your presentation with anybody that can contribute ideas or advice – colleagues and English teachers can be

especially helpful. These opportunities may not present themselves; in that case you have to create them.

Looking up Both the Meaning and Pronunciation of Unknown Words in the Dictionary

We often look up the meaning of the words in the dictionary but fail to take full advantage of the time devoted to this task because we do not double check the pronunciation of the word. Today it is not even necessary to understand the phonetic alphabet or other signs used to convey sounds in dictionaries – many online or CD-ROM dictionaries allow you to listen to the pronunciation with a click of the mouse. Appendix 6 also lists a few online sources that will allow you to hear the words you need to know pronounced by a native speaker.

Latin and Greek terminology can be tricky. Although these words are generally easy to understand because they form part of the medical vocabulary in many languages, each language has its own system of pronouncing these words and English is no exception. Appendix 1 gives a brief discussion of the rules for pronouncing these words in English, but there is really no substitute for hearing a word spoken by a knowledgeable native speaker and the above-mentioned dictionaries are ideal for this purpose.

Jotting down Tricky Words and Sentences

Write down key words and tricky terms as you come across them. This can help you with both pronunciation and spelling.

Organizing Your Ideas

Only a tiny fraction of the information gleaned from your research can be included in your presentation. It is natural to want to include all of the relevant interesting points that you have picked up along your way, and that partly explains why inexperienced lecturers tend to try to cram as much information as possible into their allotted time. You will soon realize that this approach is unviable and you will have to make some hard choices about what to include and what to omit. More than anything else, what you decide to include and to leave out will determine the character of your presentation.

While time constraints limit how much you can say, you control what you say by adjusting the two dimensions that delineate any treatise: scope and depth. Narrowing the scope of your presentation will enable you to go into greater depth; on the other hand, broadening the scope of your presentation can allow you to avoid depths that your audience would not be able to fathom. It is essential

to consider the makeup of your audience when you make these decisions. You must strive to reach the right level of depth in your presentation, and you will succeed or fail at this task depending on how well you have judged your audience's knowledge about your topic. You cannot expect an audience of medical students and residents to understand a talk that is directed at other experts in your subspecialty.

Surprisingly, the vast majority of lecturers make the mistake of assuming that their audience knows more than they possibly could about the topic of the lecture. Whether from a desire to impress other experts, a fear of being simplistic, or a merely failure to remember what it is like to be starting out, they fail to recognize the enormous differences between their knowledge and their audience's and consequently they fail to communicate their ideas.

Making the opposite mistake – presenting ideas that are too simple – is rarely as disastrous, as long as it is well done. Even experts can enjoy a well-prepared review of relatively basic material if everything else is in order. But beware – if you give too simple of a talk to a group of people well versed in a topic you had better get everything right or be prepared to be challenged.

Most audiences are mixed, so it is best to include a little something for everyone. Do not neglect to include essential background material early in the presentation to make sure you do not lose your audience at the starting gate; if you were to do that, they would never have a chance to follow you through the rest of the presentation. Do not hesitate to dive briefly to depths where only other experts could follow you, but the key word here is briefly. Any extended forays into these areas will likely alienate the rest of the audience and it might be difficult if not impossible to reconnect with them at a more superficial level. Whenever, you go deeper than a large part of the audience can follow, it also helps to summarize the more involved, technical material by restating it in simplified terms, using expressions like “in other words” or “by analogy”; this keeps those who cannot follow you from drifting off.

It is important to orient the audience from the very beginning of your talk. First, it is essential to provide them with the information necessary to enable them to understand the exact subject of your talk, to decide whether it is important to them, and to have some idea of the background that will be necessary to follow your presentation. Then, you need to give them an outline of the major points you will be dealing with and the order you will tackle each of them. Do not be afraid of “wasting” too much time in mapping your talk, this initial information will go far toward making the rest of your talk comprehensible. The old adage “tell them what you're going to tell them, tell them, and tell them what you've told them” works well for most presentations.

Organize the body of your talk to ensure a logical narrative with smooth transitions between points. Always make sure that your audience knows where you are leading them. This is even more important in a presentation than in a written document, because, unlike readers, the audience cannot go back or stop and ponder where you are taking them. Signal changes of direction or moving on to new subject new subject matter clearly, using both visual cues (specific slides) and delivery (pauses, inflection).

Finally, audiences want closure. You should try to summarize the main point of your talk into a single sentence. Your last slide should list no more than three or four main conclusions, and you should allow ample time for you to go over each one. This is where you can hammer home the points you made in the rest of the talk – don't worry about being repetitive – repetition is one of the most important tools you have to work with. Unless you emphasize your main points by repetition, nobody is likely to remember them.

Chapter 3 provides specific advice about language points to help you with different parts of your talk and transitions between them.

Creating Your Slides

To a large extent, your slides will determine the success or failure of your presentation. Your slides will provide an outline for both you and your audience to follow throughout the talk; thus, the organization and clarity of your slides is crucial to ensuring that your message gets through to the audience. Your talk should have a beginning, a middle, and an end; it is essential for the audience to know where they are in this structure at all times. One way to accomplish this is to provide listeners with a map of your talk near the beginning. It is always a good idea to let them know what is to come. To communicate effectively, your slides should be arranged to explain a narrative.

However, you must never forget that slides are not the main vehicle of communication in a presentation. Slides should support and reinforce what you communicate to the audience through your speech; they should never distract the audience's attention from the main message that you are trying to communicate with your voice.

Each slide should fulfill three inclusion criteria: it should be error-free, simple, and necessary to your narrative. You should make every effort to ensure that the mechanics (spelling, grammar, and punctuation) on your slides is perfect. Whereas listeners might be willing to forgive small mistakes in the spoken part of your presentation, there can be no excuses for mistakes in your slides. Be sure to use your computer's spell check program, and ask others to pay special attention to any possible errors in your slides while you rehearse. Chapter 4 discusses common mistakes in English language mechanics.

Limit the information on each slide to a single important point and its supporting material. Cluttered slides are difficult to read and only serve to confuse readers. Simplify graphic material if necessary to make it immediately comprehensible. You can always fill in the details with what you say.

Ask yourself if the slide is really necessary. Is it truly relevant to the main narrative or is it sidetracking? How does it fit into your narrative? If the answers to these questions are not immediately obvious to you, you cannot expect your listeners to understand why you have included this material.

Finally, there are some formal aspects of slide preparation that deserve mention. Experts have studied the effectiveness of different aspects of slide design,

and we would be foolish to ignore their findings. Here we provide just a few guidelines for designing effective slides.

Number of Slides

As a rule of thumb, you can plan on about one slide per minute if you are an experienced lecturer and about one and half slides per minute if you are a beginner with fewer resources to fill the gaps. When you rehearse your presentation, you will see if you can add a few slides or leave a few out.

Trying to present too many slides is one of the many pitfalls that can spoil your presentation. You don't want to have to fight against time to get through all of your slides.

Do not forget that when you deliver a presentation, you are not supposed to be in a rush.

Number of Lines per Slide

Another pitfall is trying to cram too much information onto an individual slide. You should limit the number of lines to six, including the headings. If that seems like very little, remember that the slide should only give the key points you want to reinforce, the bulk of the information you want to include will be found in what you say (that's why it's called an oral communication). You should never make the terrible mistake of presenting a slide in which you merely read what is projected to the audience or you will run the risk of insulting and angering your listeners.

Graphic Material on Slides

Diagrams should be simple and uncluttered. Figure legends for medical images should be absent or minimal. Again, you should fill in the gaps in the visual information with your spoken words. Choose the best kind of graph to display your data, and make sure that everything is clearly labeled. Do not post in one slide what can be posted in two. Chapter 3 provides some examples of how to use graphical material in slides.

Fonts

A boldface sans serif typestyle like Arial is easiest to read. Avoid using all capital letters, as this slows down perception considerably. The size of the letters will depend on the number of rows of the conference room. In case of doubt, the bigger the better.

Background of the Slides

Contrast is essential: you should opt for either a plain dark background with white or yellow text or a plain light background with very dark text. Color and design should never distract from the principal texts and figures. Avoid green on blue as color-blind individuals will be unable to see the contrast.

Rehearsal

Once you have decided what you are able to say in the amount of your time you have been allotted and have prepared the slides that will serve as the skeleton of your presentation, it is essential to rehearse your delivery. In fact, you will discover that you cannot actually be sure of what you want to say until you have rehearsed your talk a few times. Rehearsing allows you to check the timing of your presentation, ensure smooth transitions between slides and between sections, and to discover the weak points in your presentation while you still have time to correct them. You will see how rehearsing gives you confidence, because being prepared is the best safeguard against nervousness.

We will briefly discuss some aspects of delivery that we can improve by rehearsing and give you a few tips to help ensure that you make the most of the limited time you have available for rehearsing.

Writing Out Your Speech

Some presenters find that it is useful to write out the entire body of text that they want to say during their talk. This is not a bad idea, but you must be careful because what sounds good in writing will not necessarily sound good in speech. Be sure to use short sentences with simple language. After you write out your talk, read it out loud to see whether it sounds natural and whether you feel comfortable with the language. You will probably have to change many things to arrive at a text that you feel comfortable with.

Reading Your Presentation

Reading the text of your presentation from paper or, even worse, off your slides should not be considered a valid option. In fact, you should not read any slides in your presentation. Reading your slides aloud to the audience undermines your credibility as a lecturer and insults your audience's intelligence; after all, it is safe to assume that they all know how to read. Remember that your slides should help orient your audience to the message you deliver orally; slides cannot take on the burden of delivering your entire message.

However, if your English is so bad and you are so nervous that you cannot possibly imagine doing anything but read your presentation, here are a few tips. Try to make it as natural as possible – look up from your paper as often as possible and try to make eye contact with some of the audience. Make sure that your text is as simple as possible – use short sentences with simple language. It may help to imagine you are writing your text for an intelligent layperson rather than for an expert in your field. Rehearse as much as possible, be careful not to read too fast, be sure to pause where appropriate, and avoid speaking in a monotone.

Memorizing Your Presentation

It is not usually a good idea to memorize the exact wording of your presentation, because this practice entails the risk of getting lost. Some of the most surrealistic situations witnessed at international scientific presentations have been related to “shy lecturers” delivering “memorized talks” going blank under pressure. Moreover, memorizing all but the shortest of scientific presentations would require enormous investments of time that most busy professionals cannot allow themselves.

However, this does not mean that there is no role for memorization. It can be useful to memorize key parts of your talk like the introduction or take-home points as well as difficult parts that have given you trouble during rehearsal. Moreover, it is essential to memorize the IDEAS of your presentation. Your slides will help you and your audience with an external outline, but you also need to have an internal outline at your disposal when you get up to give your talk.

If you rehearse your talk often enough, you cannot help but memorize a large part of the text. If your English is not very good, you will need to rehearse some of the phrases many times to be able to pronounce them clearly using acceptable intonation. The greater your proficiency in the English language, the more resources you will have to allow you to concentrate on the ideas of your talk and the less you will need to memorize exact word combinations. Consequently, proficient speakers have a much lower risk of stumbling over a point if they forget the wording they intended to explain it.

Timing

One critical point that can only be dealt with by rehearsal is timing. You can never be sure how long your presentation will take until you have clocked yourself. You may discover that you have to alter your presentation to fit your time allotment; that is why it is important to finish putting your presentation together well before your speaking engagement. Remember that most people have a tendency to speak faster when they are nervous, and plan your talk to be a bit shorter than scheduled – both organizations and audiences have little patience with

lecturers that run over time, and too many presenters are cut short by the chairman's words: "Dr. X your time is over". One trick you can use to avoid running over time is to prepare a three-minute conclusion slide that you can jump to from any point near the end of your presentation. If you haven't finished presenting your details when you are three minutes from your time limit, you can jump to this slide and say something like "If we continue along these lines, we will reach these conclusions". Clearly, this strategy can only be considered as a safeguard against a disastrous ending and cannot replace careful planning and rehearsal to get the timing right.

Pacing

Timing depends on pacing. While in general it is best to speak slowly and clearly to make sure that your audience can follow you, too slow of a pace will lull your audience to sleep. In a good presentation, your pacing changes constantly to engage the audience. Slow down when you are explaining complex or difficult material. Pauses are important: you should pause after introducing an important point and after introducing a new image or graph.

Pronunciation

Even native speakers can have difficulties pronouncing some words. The only way to find out which words you tend to stumble over is by rehearsing. Although some words can be replaced by others that you find easier to pronounce, medicine is full of long words that can tie anybody's tongue into knots, and although it is often possible to find a replacement term, it will probably be necessary to say these words at least a couple of times. One example of a word like this is lymphangiomyomatosis. If you were doing a presentation on this topic, you could use the abbreviation LAM in most cases, but you will have to pronounce the full word at least twice (once at the start of your talk and again at the end). Our advice for learning the pronunciation of words like this is:

1. Divide it up in its etymological components (lymph-, angio-, myo-...)
2. Check that you know the meaning of all these components
3. Read these components aloud separately
4. Read them in pairs "lymphangio", "myomatosis"
5. Read the entire word aloud
6. Say it as many times as possible, for example, on your way to the hospital.
7. Try to talk to your colleagues about this word asking them for instance: Have you noticed how difficult it is to pronounce "lymphangiomyomatosis" in English?
8. In short, make the tricky term an easy one by repeating it over and over.

Weak English speakers will need to work hard at their pronunciation. Rehearsing with a native speaker or very fluent English speaker can help to make sure your audience will understand you. Ideally, you should work with a native speaker who has some idea of linguistics, because word stress and sentence intonation are essential to comprehension. Even fluent English speakers will mispronounce some words – words that are written the same in English as in your mother tongue can be especially problematic. The first step is to find out which words you mispronounce – most speakers find that once they become aware that they tend to pronounce a particular word wrong, this problem corrects itself.

Chapter 10 gives more advice on how to improve your pronunciation.

Eliminating Filler Phrases

Many people tend to fill gaps in their speech with empty phrases like “you know” or “basically” or with sounds like “uhm” or “er”. To a certain extent, this is only natural and throwing in the odd filler phrase from time to time to allow yourself time to think will probably be tolerated by most members of the audience. However, excessive use of filler phrases can be extremely irritating to some members of the audience. Listening to a recording of yourself will show you which filler phrases you tend to use and also point out where you tend to need them. Like words you often mispronounce, filler phrases tend to correct themselves once you become aware that they are there.

Presenting the Paper to Yourself

Once you have created your presentation, you should first deliver it to the most demanding audience in the world: yourself. Talking in front of a mirror is a good first approach. As you watch yourself, be gentle with your criticism and never cease imagining yourself giving a successful presentation. You can practice your presentation in front of the mirror every time you shave or put on your makeup. Although you might not have time to rehearse the whole presentation in these situations, you can rehearse key parts like the introduction, conclusion, or transition slides.

When you get to the point where you start to know the talk well, it is a good idea to make a video recording of the entire presentation. You can learn a lot about yourself (your movements, expressions, voice, and pronunciation) and about your presentation (strong points, weak points, and incoherent points) by watching this recording.

Rehearsing the Weak Points Alone

By rehearsing, you will soon learn where the weak points of your presentation are. Concentrate on rehearsing these weak points. Although you should repeat the entire presentation a few times over the course of your rehearsal to make sure that you get the timing right and to become comfortable with the whole package, there is no need to waste time repeating the whole presentation every time you rehearse. In fact, doing so, you run the risk of becoming sick and tired of your own presentation. Remember that if you don't like your presentation, the audience is not going to like it either.

Presenting the Paper to Your Colleagues at Your Department

Delivering your presentation to your colleagues in a clinical session is a great way to get constructive criticism and positive feedback. Invite other English-speaking professionals from outside your department, too, as they will see things from another point of view that will enable them to give you priceless advice. If nobody in your department speaks English, you can deliver your presentation in your own language – this will help you become familiar with your slides and your topic. Although you will not be able to rehearse the pronunciation of the talk, at least you will check its spelling and get started with your presentation.

It is important to do this “dress rehearsal” early enough to allow you to fix anything that your colleagues pointed out to you that is not as good as it could be and to incorporate suggestions. It would be pointless and a waste of everybody's time to wait to do this important step the night before your talk.

Final Preparations

Chapter 5 gives some advice on how to deal with some of the most common problems that can occur during your presentation. It is always wise to imagine and rehearse dealing with some of the many things that can go wrong during your presentation.

Few lecturers would be able to deliver their talk without any visual support and you must take every step to ensure that your presentation slides will work when you need them to. For that reason, you should record your presentation on at least two different media, for example on a CD and a USB data pen. It is also a good idea to store the presentations in different formats and bring along any unusual fonts or plug-ins that might give you problems. As a final precaution, it cannot hurt to e-mail the presentation to yourself at a web-based e-mail address (gmail, yahoo!mail, or hotmail) as an attached file – if all else

fails, you will be able to recover your slides from any computer with an internet connection.

Last minute rehearsal is not always possible and is seldom productive. You would take better advantage of your time enjoying the company of your colleagues and building social networks than locking yourself in your room to run through your talk once again. Try not to eat or drink too much and make sure you get a good night's sleep.

On the day of the presentation itself, you should also be careful not to eat or drink too much or too little – you don't want to have to deal with additional physical discomfort like a growling stomach or the urge to urinate while you're behind the podium. Some lecturer's take a minimal dose of beta-blocker to break the negative feedback loop by eliminating external signs of nervousness like trembling or sweaty palms, though we suspect that the efficacy of this measure is mostly due to the placebo effect. In any case, if you resort to beta-blockers, it is probably a good idea to try them out on another occasion before your big day. Chapter 5 gives additional advice on dealing with nervousness.

Be sure to dress appropriately. For most scientific talks, this means formal, conservative clothing, i.e. a suit (preferably dark) and discreet tie for men and a dress or pant-suit for women. It is also important that your clothing make it easy to wear a portable microphone. The microphone should be attached to the side of your jacket, shirt, top, or dress that is nearest the screen so that the audience can hear you when you turn toward the screen to point something out. If you have any doubts, ask the organizers and follow their advice.