

7 practical tips for giving an effective conference presentation



I've already written about the nuts and bolts of putting together the material for an effective presentation; you can find my guide [here](#). But what about the dealing with the practicalities of actually standing up and presenting the material that you've created?

Probably the biggest challenge in giving a good presentation is managing nerves. Even the most experienced speakers and performers can still find that they are nervous before they start, so you're in good company. But how do you deal with it?

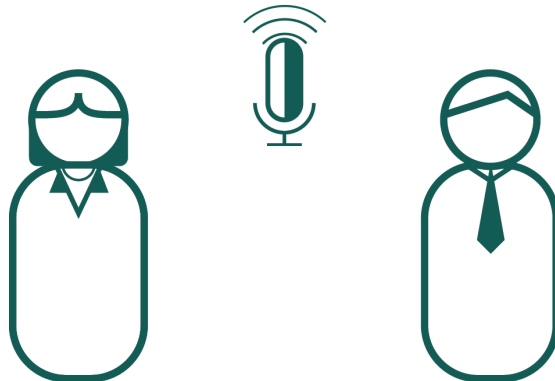
Taking practical steps to prepare well can help alleviate many common anxieties about things that could go wrong. Here, I give 7 practical tips to help you give an effective conference presentation.

1 Practice beyond the first few slides

We all know that preparing and practicing our presentations thoroughly will boost our confidence and help us relax. If we know our presentation material inside out, we'll be much more likely to relax and enjoy communicating our work.

However, I know that finding the time to practice the entire presentation many times can be difficult in our busy schedules. One tip here is not only to practice your opening slides well so you can establish the "story" of your presentation well for your audience, but then also to progress to practicing the other parts of your presentation. If you have just small windows of time available to practice each time, don't always return to practicing your presentation from the beginning. Start another short practice session from a different part of your presentation, so you have practiced all parts at least once.

The most daunting part of speaking for a non-native English speaker is likely to be pronunciation. It is a good idea to practice any words you find difficult until you can say them smoothly. Use resources like howjsay.org or ask a friend or colleague to help you practice the pronunciation. Here at ThinkSCIENCE, one of our English native speakers can read aloud your presentation (choose from 3 different speeds) and you can listen to the audio recording at work, home, or while on the move, using a PC or smart phone.



Click on the man or the woman to hear sample audio recordings

It's also a good idea to prepare for Q&A. Review your presentation and try to pre-empt questions that people might ask, so you can prepare effective answers.

2 Plan ahead

If you can, check out the room where you'll be presenting ahead of time. Make sure that all the equipment you need is there and works, so that there are no nasty last-minute surprises. Walk around the stage area until you feel more familiar and comfortable with the environment. Take your set of notes with you, and check that you can read them in the lighting conditions in the room. Make sure you know where things like plug sockets and light switches are if you are using your own equipment, so that when you arrive you won't be rushing round at the last minute to find things you need.

Think about your clothing. Wear something that you feel comfortable in and that meets the expectations of the audience. For example, business people might wear a suit and scientists might wear smart casual clothing. Check the dress code with the organizers or with colleagues if you're not sure what is appropriate. Don't choose something that is awkward and restrictive to wear solely because you hope that it might project a confident image. If you're not comfortable, you won't look or feel confident! In particular, don't wear heels unless you're happy walking in them. Also, if you know you suffer from particular symptoms of stress, like sweating, choose clothing that won't show it.

Try to get a good night's sleep before your presentation; everything looks better and more manageable if you're well rested and alert.

3 Feel comfortable on the day

Arrive in good time to the venue so you can do a final check that everything is set up correctly for you. You might then need to concentrate on physical and psychological techniques to help you relax before you speak. Stress can release a surge of the hormone, adrenaline, which sets your heart and mind racing, dries your mouth, and makes you sweat. Proven physical techniques for helping control the worst of these symptoms include deep breathing, laughing or smiling, or taking sips of water. You could also use the psychological technique of visualizing yourself delivering your presentation calmly to an interested audience.

Next is probably the most terrifying part: the point where you're walking towards the front of the room, just before you start. Remember to breathe, keep a natural pace, and don't feel like you need to rush to start before you've made sure everything is in place. Then, once you're sure, pause, look at the audience and smile before you start speaking. This pause can help stop nerves setting in badly at the start of the presentation.

4 Manage your body language and nerves

When you're speaking, a few body language tips can help improve your rapport with your audience. For your audience to engage, it's important that they can see you and that you look at them. If possible, don't hide behind a lectern or any notes you are holding.

Face the audience and make eye contact if you can. Try to spread your gaze, rather than staring at one person, as this can be unnerving for the audience. Avoid focusing intently at your laptop screen, notes, or the floor. This can give the impression that you're nervous or uninterested, and can also prevent you from projecting your voice clearly.

Try to keep a tall, relaxed, open posture, and feel free to move around the stage a little as you speak. Use gestures to emphasise your points and point to your visual material to guide the audience's attention. This is more interesting for the audience than a speaker rooted rigidly to the spot, although you should avoid nervous pacing and unfocused wandering. Be aware that some movements can be distracting too. Make sure that if you're gesturing, you hold your notes or cue cards in one hand and gesture with the other. Avoid other distracting movements, such as repeatedly putting your hands in and out of your pockets, jingling coins in your pocket, or fiddling with pens, clothing, or props such as laser pointers.

5 Speak clearly and with enthusiasm

When you speak, it's important that your audience can hear you and understand what you're saying. If you're using a microphone, make sure that you are aware of its limits! Also, nerves tend to make people speak faster and less clearly. Try to take deep breaths to calm yourself, and force yourself to speak slightly slower than you would normally. It is okay to take natural pauses as you speak, and this will calm you down and improve the clarity of your speech. If you know you get a dry mouth, take a bottle of water with you. Taking sips of water from time to time as you present can also help provide calming pauses.

You will also need to project your voice. Check that you're facing the audience and looking up. Instead of addressing people in the front row, address the people in the back row, and if you know you have a quiet voice, confirm that the back row can hear you. Maintaining eye contact with the audience is also valuable in helping maintain your voice projection throughout your presentation.

If you have small windows of time available for practicing your presentation, start each practice session from a different part of your presentation, so you have practiced all parts at least once.

Another important factor in keeping your audience interested is the intonation of your voice. Modulating the pitch, volume, rhythm, and timbre of your voice will keep people interested and help get your meaning across. A lively speaking voice also conveys enthusiasm for your work!

Most people listening to your presentation are likely to be sympathetic and will appreciate that presenting in a second language is challenging. People often dread making mistakes while speaking, and this can throw their confidence if they're already nervous. If you make a mistake while speaking, the most important advice is DON'T PANIC!

Even the most experienced speakers will stumble and things can go wrong no matter how carefully they prepare. For minor slips when you're speaking, correct yourself if you need to, and remember that the audience will not be judging you half as harshly as you judge yourself. For more obvious mistakes, it is best to acknowledge it with good humour and set it right promptly. A panicky embarrassed response will make the audience feel uncomfortable. Something like "Sorry about that" or "Let me try that again..." with a smile would work well.

6 Be ready for Q&A

At some point during your presentation, you will probably be expected to answer questions from the audience. Many presentations will have a defined time for questions at the end. If this is not the case, clarify at the beginning of your presentation whether you prefer to take questions during the presentation, which can be disruptive, or whether you'd like to take questions at the end. Answering questions can be nerve-wracking because of the fear that you might not be able to answer them. People usually ask questions out of genuine interest, not to trip you up, so see it as a good opportunity to explore how you can expand your work.

If you receive some questions that you cannot answer, don't be afraid to answer 'I don't know' if you genuinely don't know. It is far better to be honest than to make up an answer! You can offer to find out and get back to the questioner if need be, or (if appropriate) find out if anyone else in the audience can answer it.

In the unusual event that someone is deliberately provocative, be polite and answer the question directly and firmly. Here at ThinkSCIENCE, we can help you prepare for Q&A sessions and we can also help you practice them during our presentation coaching sessions.

7 Think positively!

My final tip is to remember that your audience members are interested enough in your work to come to the presentation in the first place. They'll often know first-hand what it takes to give effective presentations, and will be supportive and eager to hear what you have to say.

Summary

Presenting at conferences and society meetings offers great opportunities to share your work and to meet potential collaborators for future work. Whether you are an inexperienced presenter who would like professional guidance on improving your overall presentation skills or an experienced presenter who would like to refine specific presentation skills further, our experienced team is happy to help.

Our specialist translators, editors, and writers are available to support you in preparing effective slides, posters, and scripts and our presenters can provide [private](#) or [group](#) presentation coaching sessions at a venue of your choice or at our Tokyo training center. Please [contact our customer service representatives](#) for more information about how we can support you.

Finally, if you are giving a presentation this conference season, we wish you well!