

Chapter 5

Handling Your Nerves

You will learn how to

- reduce your fears, avoid becoming blocked, and speak calmly and relatively slowly
- focus on content rather than problems connected with your level of English
- prepare for things that might go wrong

Why is this important?

Although 90% of your nervousness is not visible to the audience, if you feel confident rather than nervous this will have a huge impact on the success of your presentation.

5.1 Identify your fears

Think about why you get nervous, for example,

I am worried that the audience won't understand my accent . . .

My English grammar and vocabulary are very poor, but if I was doing the presentation in my own language . . .

I get very nervous when I am in front of a lot of people, so there's nothing I can really do about it . . .

My results aren't very interesting so I can hardly create a good presentation around them . . .

Everybody usually has some kind of worry about doing a presentation and there are many ways to help you overcome such fears. Most of them involve things that you can do before the day of your presentation.

5.2 Don't focus on your English

If your content makes your message clear, a few mistakes in English will make no difference. The audience is made up of scientists wanting to hear your results, they are not English teachers wanting to assess your linguistic proficiency. The way you relate to the audience and involve them is more important than any grammatical or nontechnical vocabulary mistakes that you may make.

If you make an English mistake while doing your presentation

- don't worry (the audience may not even notice)
- don't correct yourself—this draws attention to the mistake and interrupts your train of thought

[Chapters 2, 6, 7, 8, and 9](#) should help you considerably to improve your English by writing short simple phrases. You can also integrate many of the useful phrases listed in [Chapter 17](#).

If you are extremely worried about doing a presentation in English, then you could opt for a poster session.

5.3 Write in simple sentences and practice your pronunciation

You only need a limited knowledge of English grammar to do a presentation, complicated forms such as conditionals and continuous forms are not generally required. You could probably manage by just knowing the present simple, past simple, *will*, and the passive form. In addition, you can try to use simple sentences that do not entail complex grammar.

A typical ten-minute presentation includes between 300 and 450 different words (depending on the incidence of technical terms and how fast the presenter speaks).

The number of different words in 15 or 20-minute presentations does not usually rise by more than 10–20 words compared to a shorter presentation, since most of the key words tend to be introduced in the first ten minutes.

Of these different words, the majority are words that you will certainly be already very familiar with: pronouns, prepositions, adverbs, conjunctions, articles, and common verbs. From my experience in teaching PhD students to do presentations, the average person may need to use between 10 and 20 words that might create difficulty in pronunciation. And learning the correct pronunciation for such a limited number of words is not difficult.

You can identify possible problems with your English if you write a script.

See [Chapter 2](#) Writing out your speech in English

5.4 Identify points where poor English might be more problematic

If you don't have the time and/or money to write a speech and have it revised, then try to make your English as perfect as possible

- in the introduction
- while explaining the agenda
- when making transitions from one series of slides to another series
- in the conclusions
- when calling for questions

These are the points when the audience will notice the mistakes the most and when they are forming their first and last impression of you, i.e., the impressions that will remain with them after the presentation.

Handling your nerves generally comes with practice—the more presentations you do the less nervous you will become. The rest of this chapter outlines strategies to reduce your nervousness.

5.5 Have a positive attitude

Although you may not be a born presenter, you will probably have one or more of the following qualities:

- an above average knowledge and considerable experience in your field
- a passion for what you do
- an ability to explain difficult technical things clearly
- an ability to find the exact answer to questions from the audience
- a professional look
- a sense of humor

Try to use these qualities to give yourself confidence and to show the audience that you know what you are talking about even if your English is not perfect. Focus on what makes you unique: your nationality, your background, your specialist knowledge.

A good presentation requires many skills that can only be learned over time. If in the past you did a bad presentation very probably it was because you had not prepared sufficiently. When you then have to do your second presentation you will have that bad memory of the first. It is important to put that bad experience behind you. Do not let it condition you. Concentrate on getting it right the second time by preparing good content and then practicing it in front of as many people as you can.

5.6 Prepare good slides and practice

You can considerably reduce your nerves if you feel you have prepared well.

If you know your slides are good, this will help you overcome some of your fears. Then during the actual presentation, when you get a good reaction to your slides and to what you say, this will automatically give you extra confidence.

5.7 Opt to do presentations in low-risk situations

The best thing is to begin your presentation career by presenting in low-risk situations, for example in front of undergraduate students at your department and at national (rather than international) conferences. Presenting in your own language will certainly help you to get the skills you need for presenting in English.

You could also offer to do teaching work at your department or institute. Teaching experience is excellent training for presentations because you have to learn to explain things clearly and engage your students. Also, as a teacher you will naturally be at the center of attention and this will help you to get used to it.

5.8 Use shorter and shorter phrases

As you practice try and make your phrases shorter and shorter. Short phrases give you time to pause quickly and to breathe between one phrase and the next—this will slow your speed down if you are nervous.

5.9 Learn relaxation techniques

As you know from taking exams, being slightly nervous actually helps you to perform better. If you are too relaxed you become overconfident. Don't worry about your nerves, they will soon disappear a couple of minutes into the presentation.

Make sure you sleep well the night before. Don't stay up all night rewriting your slides. You should arrive at the presentation feeling fresh, not tired. If you feel stiff and rigid at the beginning of a presentation you may need to learn some relaxation techniques.

Do some physical exercises before you begin:

- breathe in deeply
- relax/warm your neck and shoulder muscles
- exercise your jaw

5.10 Get to know your potential audience at the bar and social dinners

Talk to as many people as you can over coffee breaks and meals. Knowing in advance who is coming to your talk may make you feel more relaxed as they will be friendly faces in the audience.

If the audience has met you before you begin your presentation they will also probably be more motivated to listen to you. In any case, remember that at the beginning of your presentation the audience will be on your side—they will want you to succeed.

Talking to as many people as possible should also enable you to assess their knowledge of your topic and also to convince them to come and watch you rather than attend a parallel session.

5.11 Check out the room where your presentation will be

It is a good idea to familiarize yourself with the room where you are going to be doing the presentation. Try to imagine yourself in the room doing your presentation. Then think/find out about

- how loud you will have to speak given the size of the room and how far you are from the audience
- whether you will need a microphone
- where you will position yourself so that the audience can always see you and so that you don't trip over any wires
- how the remote control works e.g., how you can blank the screen without turning the projector off (the button is generally called “blank”, “hide”, “mute” or “no show”); and how effective the laser pointer is
- where chalk and pens are available for the blackboard/whiteboard
- whether bottles/cups of water will be provided

5.12 Prepare for forgetting what you want to say

A frequent problem is forgetting a specific word or phrase that you need to say.

There are three good solutions for this; you can

- look at your notes
- drink some water, or take out a handkerchief to wipe your nose, and use this time to remind yourself
- say *“I am sorry I can’t think of the word. In any case. . .”* And then you simply proceed with the next point

5.13 Prepare for the software or the equipment breaking down

Your presentation will probably be uploaded for you onto the conference PC. Test that everything works correctly as much time in advance of your presentation as possible. This is important as there are different software versions and sometimes incompatibilities between Macs and PCs (particularly regarding animations).

Some of the most successful presentations are done with no slides. If you have a printout of your slides and your computer breaks down completely then you can continue without the slides, and if necessary draw graphs on a whiteboard.

In any case, it is a very good idea to practice for such a breakdown, i.e., to give your presentation without any slides. It will teach you two things: (1) it is possible to do a presentation with no slides (2) it will show you which of your slides are probably redundant.

5.14 Organize your time

Presentations rarely go according to plan. So allow for

- the previous presenter going over his/her allocated time, meaning that you have less time to do your preparation
- people arriving late

Prepare for this by

- knowing exactly how much time you need for each part of your presentation
- having your most important points near the beginning of the presentation, never just in the second half
- thinking in advance what slides you could cut, particularly those in the latter part of the presentation
- planning how to reduce the amount you say for particular slides
- using options in your presentation software that allow you to skip slides

You cannot calculate the length of your presentation from the number of your slides. For example, if you are doing a 10-minute presentation you may spend two minutes on the title slide as you introduce yourself and the topic. Then the next slides in which you explain the background, describe your methods, and give your results may require just one minute or less each. The most important slides should be your discussion and conclusions, and you may spend more than two minutes each on these. Also, there should be parts in your presentation in which you do not need slides. This means that you need to time the whole presentation to see how long it takes, and then decide where you could make cuts if on the day of the presentation you don't have your full allocated time.

Sometimes during a presentation you are so focused that you can't even remember at what time the presentation is supposed to end (particularly if times have been changed from the original schedule). Write down the finishing time on a piece of paper and have the paper beside your laptop. You should also have your watch beside your laptop—although your laptop has its own clock, seeing your watch on the desk will remind you to check the time.

If you do run out of time don't suddenly say "*I will have stop here.*" Instead, briefly make a conclusion.

If you are ahead of schedule you can have a longer Q&A session at the end of the presentation. In any case, don't feel that you have to fill the amount of time you have been allocated. No one is going to complain if you finish a few minutes early. But they may complain if you finish late!

