Final-Stage Tips

<div style="text-align:right">**25**</div>

Abstract

The final section of this book discusses some recommended behaviors and practices for prospective presenters as the day and time of the CP approach. This final chapter is followed by two appendices. The first is a list of conference presentation guidelines as collected from academic conference organizers. The second appendix includes two author-developed self-review and peer-reviewed checklists, aimed at orienting the novice presenter toward key areas of concern and providing them with helpful, focused feedback during practice.

Readers have now (hopefully) gleaned a few more insights into performing successful academic CPs in English. However, you have a conference presentation coming up soon. As a newcomer to the arena, what can or should you do to best prepare yourself for the big day? Of course, I can assume that novice academics will practice going over their scripts until they become second nature, but are there any other preparation tips that might give it that extra boost? Based on my own experience, observations, and interviews, here are my suggestions:

25.1 Breathing

Many presenters forget or ignore this most basic physical activity when they get in front of an audience. I'm talking about consciously taking deep, full breaths. The benefits are many:

1. Breathing reduces anxiety. You can think better when oxygen intake is more naturally regulated.
2. Deep breathing allows for greater vocal projection. Reedy, nervous, voices tend not to project confidence or authority.

3. Deep breathing allows you to collect or gather your thoughts under pressure. What is more, the audience will not only wait for you but also appreciate it themselves as the audience generally tries to adapt themselves to the rhythms of the 'performer.' By giving them absorption time and allowing them to relax, they will be able to take in more of what you want to convey.
4. Breathing frees up to head and body to move, which in turn allows you to use your body more effectively as a means of emphasizing or embellishing some points of your presentation. It also serves to reduce muscle tension.
5. Remember—Breathing is one of the most important factors in making effective transitions!
6. When you are rehearsing your CP, make sure to include your deep breathing time—taking long, conscious, deep, relaxing breaths—within your time limit.

25.2   Simulation of Discussion Sessions to Practice Response Strategies

Your colleagues need not be a passive target audience for your CP practice sessions. Have them confront you with your darkest fears too! Remember how in the chapter of managing Q&A we talked about strategies? Deflecting questions, asking for elaboration, asking for clarification, negotiating understanding, admitting a lack of knowledge or experience, thanking, returning questions to the speaker, and delaying/evading responses? Well, you can have your colleagues prepare tough sample questions and then actively practice deciding which strategies to employ. For example:

> *Discussant: Why didn't you do (procedure A) instead of (procedure B)?*
> *Presenter: We weren't familiar with procedure A* (admission). *Thank you for your suggestion.* (Thanking) *Can you outline what you mean by procedure B for me in more detail*? (returning the question—clarification—elaboration).

25.3   Using an Native English Speaker (NES) for Checking and Preparation of NNES Presentations

This oft-given piece of advice can easily become a problematic area. Many native English-speaking teachers, especially of the on-campus English professor variety, can be very helpful in preparing NNES academics for English CPs, but are not always used wisely (I can speak from experience in this regard).

When many NNES academics ask for 'native speaker checks' what they really want is to have grammatical minutiae sorted out—prepositions, articles, and the like. But, as I've argued earlier, these surface features rarely constitute the make or break features of a successful CP (and would be much better suited to checking drafts of about-to-be-published research papers). While it will be cosmetically satisfactory to make sure there are no errors in your slides, focusing upon the absence of mistakes is a somewhat negative approach to presentation success. I suggest then that not only NESs but any qualified proficient English teacher, NES or NNES, can be better utilized as follows:

1. Practice your full presentation in front of *any* proficient English speaker. This will resemble your target audience.
2. Have him or her note any sections that they feel are awkward or clumsy. You might want to ask them to specifically focus upon openings, transitions, and closings here (many less-experienced English teachers tend to notice or fix only surface errors).
3. Ask them if any section was logically or rhetorically unclear or confusing. If their confusion is a matter of simply not knowing the content well, this will at least provide you with an opportunity to express that section in English in a dynamic, realistic situation—mirroring what often happens in actual CP discussion sessions. But if their confusion is a result of sloppy intonation, the imprecise use of transitional phrases, or other qualities that a non-specialist outsider would note, then you will have gained a specific target for further practice.

NNES academics should also note though that campus-based English teachers (whether NES or NNES) may not very knowledgeable about the norms and expectations of a conference presentation in your specialized field, and will rarely be familiar with the intricate details of your specific research area.

25.4 Pre-presentation Rehearsal

In this section, I want to address some helpful practices to consider for either the day of the presentation or the night before.

For fairly obvious reasons, I recommend practicing your opening until you can recite it in your sleep. What I would emphasize more though is rigorously practicing the slide or section that you dislike most. There are usually a few slides in any presentation that the speaker is uncomfortable with, for one reason or another. Perhaps the content is extremely detailed, and perhaps it is a bit mundane. Perhaps it covers some necessary but unexciting foregrounding of your main thesis. Perhaps the English you've chosen to use here is far from your comfort zone—it does not roll off your tongue easily, or you are using unfamiliar terms. This is the slide where you are thinking: If anything is going to go wrong, it is likely to happen here.

My advice is not to avoid practicing this unpleasant slide—far from it. Rather, I am suggesting that you work on this particular slide until you feel comfortable with it, until it does roll off your tongue—and possibly even change the content or arrangement of the slide itself to make it more palatable. The goal should be that the listener, your audience, never gets a sense that this is an area you've been struggling with.

This is likely a strategy that you've used in your past, particularly on important examinations—working on your weak points and not those areas that you are already comfortable with and confident in. It can be applied to conference presentations too.

25.5 Getting Used to the Physical Dimension of Your Presentation Area

Let us face it—you're nervous. Almost everybody in the same situation is. Two ways to minimize any negative impact of nerves are as follows:

a. *Make sure you know exactly when and where in your CP you will touch the computer and/or laser.*
b. *Get used to moving, at least to a small degree, within your 'presentation space.'*

Let us look at these two points in order.

Jerky, hesitant physical movements can not only cause your audience to lose a sense of the CP's flow and focus but also mess up the speech rhythms that you've already developed subconsciously. Having to move desktop items around, look at computer keys, or deal with other tools, can clutter your mental script—much as positioning yourself poorly to receive a simple pass in soccer can scuttle an entire offensive attack. You should know exactly where each item you need is and precisely at what point, and in what way, you plan to use it. Not having one's physical/environmental dimension adequately prepared for was one of the most common causes of subsequent CP breakdowns that I observed. Figure 25.1 shows a standard FP presentation space with an effective, recommended spacing plan.

Note that in Fig. 25.1, the speaker's seat (#2) is adjustable and should be moved, or even discarded with, in advance, according to the speaker's preference. The area marked #11 represents the ideal area of speaker movement, neither forcing the speaker into the narrow confines behind the podium nor blocking the audience's view of the screen. Moving in front of the podium from space #11 further allows the speaker to address the audience in a more direct manner. This, of course, may also require carrying the laser. Note that the seat marked #10 is referred to as the speaker's 'audience seat.' I suggest that, if possible, the speaker leave his or her baggage here, 'claiming' the seat, assuring not only that no one's view will be blocked but also that this most potential disruptive of seating locations remains open.
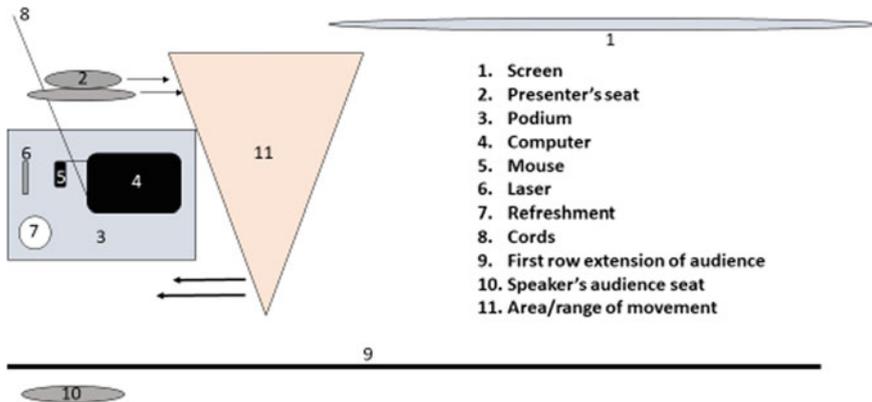
Fig. 25.1   An ideal free paper presentation physical environment

As for using up your 'presentation space,' adopting an overformalized news-reader posture may be effective in some regions of the world, where this style may be associated with politeness and propriety, but to many attendees in a fully international audience, it may appear more that the speaker is a shell-shocked novice if one does not adjust their posture at least somewhat during the CP. Keeping the same, rigid posture for 10 minutes or more is a further recipe leading to flat intonation, a lack of proper pacing, and generally putting your audience to sleep (or, conversely, making them feel just as tense as you are).

Instead, as we have mentioned several times, speakers should be sure to adopt a posture that allows them to speak with some power and authority (breathing again!) and choose adjustment areas within the CP where it seems natural, and physically comforting, to make a small physical adjustment. The impact that even slight movements can have on the efficacy of your overall message *and* maintaining the audience's attention is subtle, but very powerful. Don't underestimate them!

25.6   Clothing, Exercise, and Hydration

Generally, presenters—indeed most conference attendees, whether presenting or not—will be dressed rather formally (the continuum ranging from very formal to somewhat casual tends to run along the two axes of sciences vs. humanities and Northeast Asia vs. North America). The danger of presenting in new or highly restrictive clothing, however, is that it can inhibit movement or otherwise lead to physical awkwardness and/or discomfort.

My advice would be to not wear any item for the first time when performing a CP. I would also advise novice presenters to practice their CPs in their hotel rooms *not* wearing their pajamas or underwear, but in the exact attire they will be dressed in for the CP, including (crucially!) any jewelry, necktie, and shoes. Readers may be surprised how familiarity and comfort in wearing these items can positively affect CP performance. When it comes to dress rehearsals, the more realistic the better.

As we have noted, nerves can also lead to overly protective, restricted physical postures, which can easily carry over into performance. If there is a chance, I strongly suggest carrying out a loosen-the-muscles routine, wherever it might be possible to do so, ideally a few minutes before the CP. Even while seated before the CP begins, a presenter can stretch, tighten, and flex their muscles—long-haul airplane style. Readers will not want to endure the terrible calf cramp I once suffered in the middle of one of my earliest CPs, in which I had to hide my body awkwardly behind the podium and shake my right leg until the pain subsided.

Related to this is proper hydration. Nerves mean dry throats which further lead to creaky voices and ubiquitous onstage swallowing and gulping. Drinking about a half liter of water a few minutes before your CP should refresh your body and help get your throat and mouth into proper speaking condition. In longer presentations, it is also acceptable to drink during the presentation, especially if a water bottle or glass has been placed there by the hosts. A quick drink is most commonly and easily carried out while the audience is viewing a video or slide content that does not require the presenter's narration.

25.7   At the Last Minute

I have noticed many presenters cramming their CP notes right up until their name is called by the chairperson. I generally advise against this because it can lead to cognitive muddling and confusion. In order to be clear-headed when your CP turn comes, I would advise presenters to *not* go over any written scripted notes within 30 min of their presentation time (and certainly not while another presenter is speaking), but rather to use that time to hydrate and move their body to unload nervous baggage.

I also advise presenters *not* to make last-moment changes to their slides or 'scripts' unless a major problem has been noted. Last-minute additions and subtractions can throw off order, timing, and generally undermine the confidence of novice presenters.

Table 25.1 shows a summary of pre-presentation suggestions for readers:

Table 25.1 Pre-presentation suggestions	Practice twice in your presentation clothes while standing (in the hotel room)
	Focus on those slides you enjoy the least when you practice
	Listen to a recording or watch a video you have made of your own presentation
	Keep strict time when practicing
	Visit the presentation room and check the computer setup, screen, podium, and mic in advance (before any facility activities begin)
	Do not make last-minute changes, unless absolutely necessary
	Do not cram at the last minute, especially during other peoples' presentations
	Drink some water, breathe deeply and slowly, and move your body a few minutes before you present

Questions and Exercises for Chapter 25

1. List three of your current pre-presentation habits, both good and bad.
2. List any three pre-presentation practices listed in this section that would be of most value for you to adopt before delivering a CP.
3. Are there any good or bad pre-presentation practices that you would add to this list?