



Professional Presentations for an International Audience

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Context: The opportunity to deliver a professional presentation to an international audience is a privilege. As with all other presentations, preparation and planning are essential components for a successful outcome. The difference between a diverse international audience and a homogeneous audience of the same background as the speaker requires consideration of additional factors associated with relevant delivery of the content matter. Recognition and integration of cultural differences, language barriers, and delivery expectations are critical to the creation and conveyance of one's presentation.

Objective: This article will share advice for preparing for and delivering presentations to an international audience.

Data Source: Factors to consider when preparing a platform-style presentation include knowing the cultural background of audience members, the speed and tone of one's delivery, the appearance of slides, the use of hand gestures, and the integration of appropriate terminology. The process of speaking through an interpreter and additional methods that have been proven to be effective in the delivery of an international presentation will also be identified.

Conclusion: One can never have enough experience, as each presentation to a diverse international audience may be vastly different.

Key Words: Communication, speaker, slides

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KEY POINTS

- Professional presentations for international audiences may require slightly different preparation.
- Presentation delivery to an international audience should consider cultural differences.
- Language and verbiage of presentation should be reviewed for audience comprehension.

INTRODUCTION

Successful speaking in front of an audience whose native culture and/or language are different from one's own should never be taken for granted, regardless of experience and past performances. Even the most seasoned presenters must prepare to effectively deliver a presentation to an international audience. It is said that public speaking to participants who speak different languages tends to shift one's focus toward the audience and away from the content itself.¹

It is assumed that the majority of readers of this *Journal* practice athletic training in the United States; therefore, it is worthy of note that presentations given in the United States may not be perceived in the same way when offered to other cultures. Speaking to an international audience can be mastered with appropriate preparation using some simple methods that can be applied as a starting point for a presenter. The intent of this manuscript is to provide practical advice for mastering professional presentations to culturally diverse, international audiences based upon our experiences and anecdotal evidence that colleagues have shared from their international exchanges.

PROPOSAL SUBMISSION

The process of preparing depends upon whether the presentation was submitted as a proposal or if the speaker was invited. As an invited speaker, it is quite possible that one possesses past, perhaps even vast, experience giving professional presentations, and simply needs to learn to prepare for a presentation in front of the specifically invited international audience. If the presentation is being proposed, there are more specific recommended steps one should take in order to strengthen the proposal.

Many are familiar with standard presentation proposals for conferences held in the United States, including conferences that may very well be composed of international attendees. The format for proposal submission is typically limited to a determined number of words or characters written in third-person format, with accompanying objectives (written in accordance with the Bloom taxonomy) and key words. Conferences held within the United States typically follow a traditional submission format very similar to that described here.

It is not uncommon for conferences (or "Congresses") held outside of the United States to entertain a different style of proposal format. For example, may prefer a first-person

narrative format with more of a storytelling approach as compared with a traditional "subtitled" research abstract proposal. For this reason, it is most helpful to research successful proposals from previous years before submitting a proposal, rather than submitting one without knowledge of the preferred writing style. Different privacy and confidentiality laws and philosophies may also apply. A case report or case series, for example, may include personally revealing information within an abstract that would otherwise be unacceptable for meetings held in the United States. In general, a traditional abstract would not disclose the patient's identity, whereas one might find it acceptable internationally to provide a patient's name, as the patient's level of popularity may bring greater interest to the case.

It is very helpful to know terminology commonly used in other countries. For example, one simple yet commonly interchanged word in the sports medicine world is *soccer*. In many countries outside of the United States, soccer is referred to as *futbol*, whereas what is typically referred to as football in the United States is called *American football*. Although it is not necessarily wrong to use the term *soccer* when drafting a proposal for an international conference, the use of terms most familiar to potential reviewers may make a stronger connection and result in a more favorable impression.

Once a proposal is accepted, one should learn about the venue, the host country, and the likely background of the participating audience. It may not always be possible to learn the details of a room arrangement, but regardless of where one is speaking, it is always helpful to have a sense of the setup. How is the podium arranged in relation to the location of the projection screen? What is the overall size of the room, and how many attendees should you anticipate in your session? Most specifically, know the length of time for the presentation, as international conferences typically adhere to strict limits of time with moderators instructed to maintain an on-time schedule.²

A presentation audience in a foreign country may be composed mostly of that country's inhabitants, or it may be more diverse and include numerous participants from different countries, speaking different languages. Be sure to learn the declared official language for the conference ahead of time. In a host country that is offering a course promoted primarily within its borders, it is likely that country's official language will be the official language of the conference. A conference that is promoted for an international audience will most likely use English as the official language of the conference, though it will still require preparation of the presentation for a diverse international audience. It is recommended that, when speaking to a global audience, a speaker "removes any self-ethnocentric judgments and engages audiences with a completely open, tolerant, sensitive, and respectful manner."³

When preparing, consider how best to address the needs of the international audience. How commonplace and recognizable

Table. Examples of Phrases that Have Different Meanings in Different Languages

English Word/Phrase	Alternative Meaning	Language/Culture
Mad (angry)	"insane"	British
Brat (annoying)	"brother"	Russian, Polish, Croatian
Gift (present)	"poison"	German
Jock (athlete)	"derogatory"	Scottish
Pants (outer leg wear)	"underwear"	British
Braces (for teeth)	"suspenders"	British
Air (O2)	"water"	Indonesian
Ohio (state)	"Good morning"	Japanese

is the topic? Is it something that the audience would be very familiar with? Or is it a topic that is unique to the presenter's line of research? Keep these questions in mind during the development of the slides. A stellar presentation may be poorly received if the knowledge level of audience members is inadequate to connect the presentation to their research interest or area of clinical practice. It is important to consider the research and practice culture of the audience. For example, if a topic is addressed that includes reimbursement for patient care, the information may not be understandable to audience members who work in a different health care system and structure.

PREPARATION OF AUDIOVISUAL AIDS

For a platform presentation, it is likely that some form of audiovisual aid will be used. It is always best to keep things simple and think conservative, using dark background colors and a bright (white or yellow) font color.² Unusual background graphics are not encouraged, as they merely serve to make it more of a challenge for non-English-speaking participants to read the text. In some Latin American countries, the color yellow has a strong negative connotation, although typically a bright yellow font text on a dark blue background is usually pleasing to one's eyes.⁴ It is recommended to keep the title of the presentation short and use clear and concise objectives. It is best to limit bulleted slides to no more than 3 lines. With English as a second language, it may take individuals longer to process the definitions of the words and the entire context of each statement. It is also helpful to use larger fonts that are more easily seen, especially in a large room. Individuals with an interest in the content, and especially those who are not able to keep up with the speed of the presentation as a result of the difficulty in language interpretation, will often take photos of each slide.

Therefore, carefully scanning the presentation ahead of time for words and terms that potentially may be confusing can be helpful to the audience.⁵ Similarly, pay careful attention to all words and phrases that may not be standard to the profession, as they may have a different meaning in a different language or culture. For example, something like "ETA" (estimated time of arrival) or "DIY" (do it yourself) may not be understood at all in an audience that doesn't speak native English. There are many examples of commonly used phrases that would likely not be clearly understood in another country (Table).

Images, graphs, and tables are of interest to participants who capture data on their cell phones and iPads.² Images should be clear and of high quality, particularly if the table or graph is

not original and has been borrowed from another source. The International System of Units, which is derived from the metric system, should be reviewed when presenting measurement data. Not only will this assure the delivery of information in the most accepted format, but the American speaker can use this opportunity to foster greater proficiency with the metric system; this can serve as a wonderful learning opportunity to enhance one's global knowledge. When an image, graph, or table is shown, participants are focusing cameras to capture it, and are less likely to listen to what is simultaneously being spoken. Pausing briefly allows for time for participants to capture the image and not lose the meaning behind the message.⁴

Participants may also want to communicate with a presenter after a presentation, especially if any visuals were not captured successfully or content not understood. It is helpful for the presenter to include contact information on a closing slide. Doing so may also expand the presenter's future networking and international speaking opportunities through newly established professional relationships.

PREPARING THE DELIVERY

The delivery of the presentation incorporates many different components that lead toward a successful outcome. A critical component of preparation is to not underestimate the amount of time needed to prepare for the unique nuances of an international audience.

Consider the words and phrases that are expressed in the presentation. Avoid using complicated words that the audience may not understand. Keep in mind that certain words pronounced in the English language do not coincide with how they may phonetically appear on a slide. This may confuse a participant who needs additional time to understand the meaning of a single word. This added time may lead to a lost opportunity to understand an entire concept.

Speaking slowly, clearly, and with complete sentences that avoid the use of American slang will make the presentation much easier for an international audience to process. Even properly pronounced words can lead to confusion. It can be helpful to express a familiarity with a country, region, or professional culture during a presentation. Reading the local news of a region online may provide tips related to current events. Learning about such events can offer insight as to topics that one may want to avoid as part of an opening or closing line. Topics that may be viewed as controversial or inappropriate may include politics, human rights, or other

aspects of the culture that differ from one's own. Or perhaps learning about local events may provide for an opportunity to better connect with the audience.^{5,6} For example, major sports events, the weather, or other similar connections between cultures could serve to comfortably relax a speaker and make a fairly simple connection with the audience during formal presentations and informal conversations alike.

One decision to make is whether or not to use a slide as a self-introduction to the audience. This can serve as an icebreaker and perhaps make a stronger connection between the presenter and the members of the audience.² Examples of this might include showing a map of the presenter's hometown, photos of one's workplace setting, or a photo of the collective research team. Participants may enjoy this and gain a better feel for the presenter's background and geographical home. If this approach is chosen, considering a limitation for the time spent on an icebreaker would be prudent so that it does not take away from the focus of the content.

For a public speaker, an effective delivery technique involves inserting axioms and slang-type phrases that are commonly known to members of the audience.⁷ When one is speaking to audiences from different countries who speak different languages, such phrases may not have relevance or meaning. For example, the phonetic pronunciation of "ASAP" (A-Sap) with the intentions of saying "as soon as possible" may be unclear to members of the audience. Axioms frequently relate to sports-related phrases, such as "this is a home run" or that method "struck out." These 2 examples come from the sport of baseball, which is not played nor understood in all countries. Trying to explain either term to someone who does not understand the sport of baseball may be a challenge. Aside from phrases associated with sports, there are other terms, such as "jump the gun" or "give the cold shoulder," that serve as examples of potential communication gaps during an international presentation.

Speakers often have a habit of including nervous word fillers, such as "um," "you know," or others. Avoiding the inclusion of word fillers provides for clearer pronunciation, as the additional sounds create more work from a processing perspective and can distract from the overall comprehension of the intended content.

In general, a speaker's tone, phonetic pronunciation, and pace of delivery should be such that all members of the audience can successfully comprehend the meaning of the content.⁸ Potgieter⁷ suggests presenting information at between third- and fifth-grade levels of comprehension.

Speakers have a tendency to use bullet points on a slide to prompt one to refer to a larger context of information. The rationale for using bullets is not to read word for word from a slide, but rather to have a few key words that trigger a presenter to further describe a key point. With an international audience, it is actually better to simply read what is on the slide, and not speak to a different phrase or word usage while the audience is reading the slide text. To better appreciate this concept, one can imagine oneself in a similar situation, trying to understand what someone is saying in a foreign language while the slides say something different. There is a temptation on the part of a speaker who possesses

greater knowledge on a subject matter to ad-lib beyond the shown slide. This approach to information sharing is discouraged. A more simplistic delivery that allows for greater comprehension of the textual information that is enhanced with matching verbal pronunciation is a better approach. Strategic pauses are also advantageous, allowing for increased time for participants to read, listen, and process the information.

Experienced presenters also like to use openers or closers as part of a presentation to entertain or engage an audience. Although these tactics have a time and a place, including them in a presentation to an international audience can be risky if they are not perceived to be appropriate or understandable. In particular, jokes should be kept to a minimum—or should not be used at all.³ It is quite possible that a joke may not be understood. This could happen for many reasons, ranging from an inability to interpret the meaning of the joke to a cultural humor that one is unable to relate to. The response to humor is different for different cultures. In the worst-case scenario, a joke may be perceived as being offensive. When choosing to incorporate humor, it is recommended to test it first with a similar audience. Doing so with a positive reception still does not guarantee that the joke will go over as planned. Equally important, if the presentation is of a shorter length, presenters will not want to use their limited time on an opening or closing attempt at humor. There are exceptions, but they should be used with caution. For example, in Australia, humor is very much appreciated in presentations. One should still be absolutely certain that an attempt at humor would be perceived well. The differences in cultural humor may not be understood. Also, in some rare cases, some speakers at conferences use less-than-appropriate terms and forms of humor compared with what would be considered highly offensive in the United States. If the goal is to perform well and receive future international speaking engagements, using humor is not a recommended technique for a novice international presenter.

Another temptation of a speaker presenting in a foreign country is to get cutesy and use foreign-language terms in an effort to please the hosts. If one knows the language and can truly speak it, this can serve as a plus. However, simply looking up the translation of a word or phrase runs the risk of mispronouncing it or using an inappropriate dialect, in which case the attempt to feel more welcomed may in fact backfire and come across as bad humor. Similar to how someone from overseas may not understand differences in dialect in the United States between Boston, New York, Alabama or Minnesota, neither might someone from the United States understand regional dialect differences between provinces of another country. "Hello," "good bye," and "thank you" can be safe and simple terms to learn and use as a hospitable connection, so long as they are spelled and/or pronounced correctly.

Some larger international conferences do not identify an official language and will instead have interpreters available. These may be in sign or by way of audio. When speaking to an international audience through an interpreter, one should plan to speak approximately 10% slower and plan for pauses between sentences or strings of sentences to allow the message to be delivered. Additionally, and equally as important, pausing before advancing each slide allows the audience to

read the slide and have more time for interpretation.¹ When speaking through an interpreter, the portion of time one has to deliver content is slightly less. A rule of thumb is to plan 3 to 5 minutes less for every 15 minutes of presenting to allow for a slower pace of delivery and strategic pauses.

Speaking through an interpreter can also make it difficult to maintain one's train of thought. The amount of information an interpreter can recall and repeat varies. If a presenter's statements are too short, the presentation becomes very choppy and the take-home messages may be lost. Conversely, if the presenter's statements are lengthy, the interpreter may not deliver the information as spoken. It is easy to be distracted by the interpreter's delivery. The language is foreign and the presenter may not be certain if the translation accurately reflects the delivered words or the audience's understanding of the message. When possible, plan to meet with the interpreter and rehearse the content of the presentation point by point. Learn the pace of delivery that works best for the interpreter. Strive to maintain the pace and focus on the information to be provided after the interpreter is finished speaking. Occasionally an interpreter will need a presenter to repeat or rephrase what was said, as some English words are not easily translated into the language of the conference. Similarly, a member of the audience may seek clarification of the meaning of a word or phrase. When this occurs, the presenter should slow down the delivery and respond to such requests, pause, and then return to the planned delivery. With experience, a presenter can become proficient at speaking through an interpreter.

During the delivery of the presentation, there are a few other items of consideration. The first, as with any presentation, is to establish eye contact with members of the audience. In some Asian cultures, and in Africa, too much eye contact may be considered rude and intrusive.⁹ Such knowledge brings added value when speaking to an international audience, as it allows the presenter to assess the audience's reaction to the presentation. In a very simple manner, the presenter may notice facial expressions that give off the sense of confusion or misunderstanding, or the presenter may see head nods of approval that may convey a level of understanding. In some instances, the body language of participants can also convey a signal of their interest. In Japan, for example, it is common to show concentration and attentiveness in public by closing the eyes and slowly nodding one's head up and down.^{4,10}

Another consideration when delivering a presentation to an international audience is that of gestures. Some people like to use their hands while they speak to emphasize points of importance, or just in general as part of one's own learned communication style. Not all gestures convey the same meaning between cultures. In the United States, a thumbs-up gesture typically means "OK" or "good," whereas the same gesture in some places (Australia, Greece, the Middle East, Africa, Iran) has a pejorative meaning.⁴ Additionally, waving goodbye when done in some parts of Europe means "stay put."^{4,10} In his book *Gestures: The Do's and Taboos of Body Language Around the World*, Axtell¹⁰ describes how one would use hands to demonstrate the height of a person. In the United States, when one gestures the height of someone from the ground up, typically the palms are facing downward toward the ground. However, in Colombia, for example, doing so in the exact same manner refers to the height of an

animal. Audience members could be insulted that they are being referred to as animals if you are trying to demonstrate the height of a person. Another example is described when one gestures with the hand out and fingers curled, as in asking an audience member to join a presenter on the stage. This might seem perfectly appropriate to indicate an interest in having one move toward the direction of the presenter on the stage. However, in Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Australia, this is how animals are called, and may be considered offensive to some.¹⁰

One last piece of advice about speaking to an international audience relates to a question-and-answer format or panel-type session. It is possible that as a presenter one will field a question and provide an answer and the audience member might not understand what was said. It is important not to immediately assume the audience members do not understand the content, in which case one would typically rephrase the answer. It may be best to first learn if the participant does not understand because of the language barrier, in which case it may be more appropriate to repeat the original answer verbatim and more slowly. If after this is done the response remains unclear, the problem may still be a language barrier, or it may be the context of the answer. When confusion still exists, a follow-up sidebar discussion after the formal session to better clarify the exchange is most beneficial.

The overall appearance of the presenter must also be considered. A predetermined vision of dressing professionally in business-casual attire is typical when speaking to a professional audience of one's peers. Although this is what would be suggested as a starting point, once again it would be helpful to inquire of conference organizers and/or previous attendees as to the comfort level of dress for presenters. For example, in some countries, jeans are a very acceptable form of dress for speakers. In some countries, it is not necessary to wear a tie. In some countries, it is inappropriate for a woman to wear slacks.¹¹ On some occasions, the location and its weather may play a role in determining the proper and acceptable attire. For example, indoor conference rooms often have temperature fluctuations that are not predictable. Less common are conferences held in outdoor venues where the temperature might be uncomfortably hot. The presenter should learn if a particular conference has a theme. An example of this would be participating in a conference that promotes comfortable summer beach casual dress in accordance with a theme. Dressing in a sport coat and tie while all other speakers are wearing beach shirts, khaki shorts, and sandals would leave one feeling slightly uncomfortable and out of place despite the otherwise appropriate level of professional dress.

The most important take-home message is to prepare and rehearse.¹² Rehearse for time. Rehearse for delivery. Rehearse for a diverse audience. Rehearse for potential technology snafus.

ADDITIONAL TIPS

Few presentations come off perfectly regardless of how much experience a speaker possesses. When giving a professional presentation to an international audience, the most important thing one can do is prepare and obtain as much knowledge about the venue, the participants, and the process as possible.

When this is done, a presenter will be as prepared as one can possibly be. Each international experience is like starting all over and is unique in its own way. A presenter will gain valuable knowledge from the very first international presentation, but this knowledge may not apply in its entirety for future presentations in different countries, to different audiences, in different formats. Regardless, a presenter who follows the same process of preparation will gradually improve and become more comfortable with each presentation.

One final thought: it is not recommended to bring attention to the presentation by revealing that it is the presenter's first time speaking internationally. When a speaker apologizes for something, or reveals a weakness, such as "I have never spoken before an international audience on such a big stage," it will only draw attention to that aspect of the delivery. Instead, one should prepare thoroughly and appropriately and deliver the presentation with confidence.

CONCLUSION

Speaking professionally to an international audience is a different experience when compared with a more familiar domestic presentation. Components of the delivery, including, but not limited to, the pace of the words and phrases spoken, body language and gestures, and strategic pauses, should all be considered. Gathering as much information as possible about the venue, the culture of the geographical host location and likely participants, and the theme of the conference is helpful to properly prepare for a successful presentation. The opportunity to present at an international conference is a personal and professional achievement. Thorough preparation will make the experience memorable and rewarding.

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