Tips for doing effective presentations

After delivering hundreds of presentations and lectures over the years, I have learned that doing successful presentations is an Art, which can be acquired only over time and by practice.

There are 3 basic ways to learn this art:

1. *Listen to great speakers*: Attend as many programs of great speakers as possible. Subject spoken is immaterial here, what you are learning is the "Master's" way of doing it.
2. *Read about doing presentations*: There are now plenty of books on doing effective presentations and Internet has numerous pages on this. Read them.
3. *Keep Doing it*: Get on stage as many times as you can and just do it. As they say, your mistakes teach you more than anyone. So as you keep doing more and more presentations, you will learn on your mistakes and improve.

   Apart from the above 3 tenants, following is what I learned over the years
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General Tips:

1. *Know your audience well* – try to get before-hand, the profile and the number of audiences. It is also a good idea to ask the event organizers, what they consider as the success of the event.
2. *Prepare on the subject* - a time honoured tip!
3. Before the start of the presentation, *try to get into the hall and spend few minutes* looking around it. This is to make yourself comfortable with the place and ease your anxiety.
4. Before your presentation, if you get a chance to sit on the stage with other speakers, use the opportunity. Try to sweep *the hall with your eyes and make few eye-contacts with the audiences*. Don't take the eye-contact to extreme and stare at one person for long time, they will get nervous. Just do it for a second with one person and then keep moving. This will boost your confidence.
5. *Start with a "Joke" or "Tidbit" or "Exciting News"* relevant which is related to the day's topic but not part of the topic directly.
6. *Introduce yourself* – You have worked for it, you have put in effort, you deserve your limelight. Speak your name, loud & clear in a way you will like to hear it to being pronounced by others. Tell about your background especially relevant experiences to today's topic. Having said that, If the host already has introduced you, don't repeat your "Profile" all again. Always keep the introduction short.
7. *Learn to study the body language of your audience.* Most of the time, when they are bored or if they think you are lying, you can read that from their body language.
8. Deliver your presentation in *clear voice, don't use any accents*.

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9. During your presentation, don't keep looking at your laptop or the screen all the time. *Stand Straight, make frequent eye contacts* with the audience. Sweep the hall (across all the four corners) with your eye.
10. If you can walk during the presentation walk but don't run on stage. *Make small and firm strides.* If you keep walking left-and-right across the stage too fast, audiences will get a stiff neck. Remember, they are not watching a tennis-match!
11. *Never overshoot your time.* Always keep a tab on time. Rehearsing your timing beforehand really helps here. {I normally keep my wrist watch in a comfortable viewing position for me to check the timing}.
12. More than overshooting the time, *it is very embarrassing if you finish well in advance.* If you do it, you will appear to your audience as someone who doesn't know enough on the topic.
13. Finally once the presentation is over, speak to your friends (if they were present) or to the hosts and *ask them for a honest/frank feedback.* This is super critical for you to improve in future. Also speak to few of the audience, and casually ask them questions with an objective to understand how much of your topic has reached them.
14. *If the event was recorded (Video or Audio) asks your hosts to give you a copy of it.* It is a good idea to carry a blank CD or Mini-DV cassette and give it to them along with your business card. This way they will remember to do the favour for you.
15. If there was a feedback form, take time after the event, talk to event organizers and go through atleast few tens of completed feedback forms in person. This is important, even if they promise to send an excellent report with all statistics and chart after the event. Reason being, by the time the well-prepared report comes, it will be couple of days/weeks and you would have gone to a different job/forgotten about the specifics of the presentation. So when the event is fresh in your mind, try to *gather first-hand opinion.*
16. *Presentations and Speaking are good oppurtunities to network.* So carry good number of your business cards and give it to people whoever asks for it. If it is a product selling presentation you are doing, then it is a good idea to even keep some of the cards on the podium/dias for people to self-service. Also remember to talk to walk around with people if there is a lunch/dinner happening after the dinner.
17. How irritating it is to hear a mobile phone ring during a presentation. Before you asking the audience, *please remember to switch off your mobile and put it in away* (say in your laptop bag). At times it will be a good idea to do it on stage while you start talking, this way you will set an example and reminder to others' to do it, rather than asking them to do it.
18. Finally, *don't leave your mobile or wallet or other valuables on podium/dias.* There is every likelyhood, that after the presentation you will be preoccupied with questions from audience and you will forget to collect your items back.

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Health/Life Style Tips:

1. *Try to get a good-night sleep.* For the audience, your eyes are the window to you, so a well-rested body has relaxed good-looking eyes. {Having said it, most of the times, I prepare my slide-decks the day before, but everytime when I practiced this, I felt my presentations to be much better}.
2. *Be in Rome as "Romans" do.* So check with your host/event organizers on the dress code they are expect you. I normally stick to formals (no-tie or suit) for technical presentations, Suits for Business Presentations and Relaxed-formals for other presentations.
3. *Keep a bottle of water handy* in the podium. When you are speaking, especially in an Air-Conditioned halls, your mouth gets dry very quickly.
4. After a long presentation (60 - 90 minutes) when you are back home, *a good mouth-gargle* (with water/glycerin or salt-water) has a soothing effect.

Doing Technical Presentations:

1. *Learn the subject you are going to be presenting thoroughly.* Today audiences have access to nearly all the information (or at times more) on the subject through Internet and if it is Microsoft Technologies through MSDN Online and various blogs.
2. If you are *stepping-in last minute for a different speaker*, and you don't have time to prepare fully on the subject, at-least take the effort of preparing a *map of land-mines.* These are list of topics/areas on the subject that you are not fully-aware, this way you can stay clear off (or atleast step on as gently as possible) of the land-mines.
3. **On an average for every slide you should budget 3 to 5 minutes, depending on the complexity. So a 90 minutes presentation, maximum you should have is 30 Slides. If you have demos, this number should come down.**
4. If you are talking about a particular product *Never Criticize or Attack competition directly.* If you have to do it, do it only after presenting strong data and statistics supporting your product. If you do it without data, it will result in a blood bath in the hall (needless to say most of the blood, would have come from your body). Always, try to remain factual in the presentation. At the same time, don't hesitate to point out errors/omissions/defects in competition's argument.
5. **During the presentation or especially during the demos, if you forget a particular step or point that you rehearsed don't try yourself hard to remember it. Simply ignore it and move on.**
6. *Don't pause for undue duration in between,* even if you are waiting for something else to happen (like application to load, compilation, etc). Continue talking during that time. This gap is useful for throwing some jokes & interesting points. In a way this will shake-up the audience and wake those you are sleeping.

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Authoring Power Point Slide-Decks:

1. *Slides should be brief*: Typically a single Power Point Slide shouldn't contain more than 1 or 2 images and not more than 5 to 6 points. Remember MS Word is a better tool to write pages and essays and Power Point is a bad tool to write long paragraphs.
2. *Slides are only pointers*: Continuing on the previous point, remember that the slides are only pointers for you to recollect and speak. The slides shouldn't communicate the entirety to audience – if that is the case, you have no role to play in the hall, the audience can read it for themselves.
3. Generally keep your slide *background to a solid, light colour.* Remember that projectors don't show colour as great as your monitor and from a distance dark colour fonts appear on a light background appear clearer. {This is the reason why Cars around the world have their Numberplates in White or Yellow background and with Black colour lettering}.
4. *Avoid cliparts or cartoons unless they are absolutely necessary*. Even if you use them, use sparingly. Remember, everyone in the audience would have for sure, seen the MS Office cliparts hundreds of time. I have seen in many PPTs, where the presenter has used almost all the Cliparts that Microsoft manages to ship with MS Office CD.
5. Spend the time to *learn Power Points powerful (less-used) feature of Master Slides* (View-Master-Slide Master Menu).
6. Reduce the number of times, you do changes to fonts and colours on individual slides. Continuing on previous point, try to make tweaking only to your Slide Master and let it run across your slide-deck.
7. *Reduce the usage of Serif Fonts. Try to use only Sans-Serif fonts for everything in your slides*. Typefaces generally fall into two broad categories: serif and sans serif. Serif fonts, such as Times New Roman have little "tails" at the ends of each character stroke that lead a reader's eye from character to character, increasing reading speed. Sans serif fonts, such as Arial and Verdana, don't have these tails; as a result, reading is difficult for long passages of text because the eye isn't moved from character to character.
8. *Don't create Power Point templates from scratch*. Use the templates that ship out-of-box with Power Point and then start tweaking them. For example if the background image you want use across all your slides is White-based, start with one of the standard templates that have white background, replace your background image and go from there. This way you will get best practices on fonts, colours and alignments for free and you only need to change things you don't like.
9. Most of the projectors are capable of doing only 1024x768 resolution, so make your slides/demos look good at that resolution.

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Laptops, Audio-Video & Systems:

1. Even if you are carrying your own laptop with the presentation loaded, *have backups.* Always have a copy of your PPT in a USB Thumb drive (and remember to carry it) or email it beforehand to the host of the event and request them to have it loaded on an alternate system.
2. *Check/Double-check all your hardware, cables, power-supply and software.*
3. *Always run your laptop from Power-Supply.* Even if your laptop can run for more time without power, than the length of the presentation, don't use battery. Modern day laptops, reduce the speed of CPU if you are running with battery.
4. Keep all the *applications that you are demo'ing open before the start of the presentations.* Most of the times applications tend to take more time when you are on stage.
5. *Increase your font size to say "20" in Notepad/VS.NET/IDE* if you are showing Code.
6. *Stick to simpler font-faces like Courier or Tahoma*, I believe source code looks good with these fonts.
7. If this is the first time, you are doing a demo with this laptop – then *connect your laptop to an external monitor* and check the day(s) before.
8. If you are going to be using a laptop for the first time during the presentation, *then practice using a laptop before the presentation*. The usage of touch-pad/pointer is completely a different feel from a mouse. Better still, request/carry a mouse and connect it before the presentation.
9. Go 20-30 minutes early to hall/stage before the audiences comes in, then wire your laptop and check with the projectors. *Try to build a "Rapo" with the A/V assistant* there, remember he is your best friend in the entire hall during the presentation.
10. If you *need Internet connection, inform the Event Organizers well in advance* (A week really helps). I have learned the hard-way that the grander the hall (the more stars if it is a Hotel) greater the difficulty for them to give you Internet Connection or Phone Connections. This pain is now relatively eased due to Internet connection through Mobile phones and WI-FI. Here again, on most halls for some reason (because they tend to be below ground) have poorest signal strength near the stages. So test it before hand.
11. **Remember that the Murphy's law works at its best during technical presentations and especially during beta demos.**

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Sharing the stage:

1. If you are doing the presentation with another speaker, *remember to get the story-board discussed well in advance*. Apart from doing this, you need to definitely rehearse once or twice. Because the chemistry on stage between you two is very important – and it doesn't come that easily unless you know the other person very well and have worked/spoken with him before.

2. If story board is not discussed before hand, *then do "Divide and Conquer"*. {If I am sharing a stage with a speaker who I haven't met before – I normally do "divide and conquer", meaning I clearly divide the portions between us. For example, it will be first "10" slides by me and the next "10" by the other speaker or it will be that I do all the Slides and the other person does all the demos. This way I avoid stepping on his/her shoes}.

3. In the introduction slide, *the hierarchy of names is important*. Generally have the first name on the slide to be of the person who is going to do the major portion. If you are doing the presentation along with your superior/boss/client then it is etiquette to have their name first, even though you may be doing the major talking.

4. If you are presenting along *with your colleague, remember to give him/her adequate time to introduce* and talk.

5. If you finished a portion, the other speaker is starting, *it is OK to say "Thank you" to you for the first time*, but it shouldn't be repeated at every switch.

6. Divide the total time between you and have a pre-agreement on who is going to reduce their portion when time becomes short.

7. When the other speaker is speaking, please don't keep typing on your laptop or keep gesturing at your friend in the first row. *Focus your attention, just like the audience on the speaker*. If you do otherwise, it shows your disrespect for the speaker.

8. Similarly, when the other speaker is doing a demo and forgets a step, don't go bullish and help immediately. *Give some time and after that try to convey the idea as discreetly as possible*.

9. *Finally there can be only one captain to the ship*, so agree between you that for the duration of the presentation, who is that captain. This basically means who can call the shots, when an emergency like demos not working, embarrassing question comes in, short of time, etc. Having a captain makes it easy and avoids conflicting fire-fighting decisions on stage. Remember, in situation like this, you have to think on your feet (sometimes it may not be logical/correct) and two people can never think the same quick-fix.

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Answering Questions – Q & A:

1. If you are new to doing presentations, *don't encourage taking questions during the talk.* Announce to audience at the start, that you will take all questions at the end. Taking questions in-between, normally interrupts your flow and regaining your position is very difficult – you can very easily drift from your main message. Change this rule, once you have become an "Ace" in presentations. This is because, taking questions in-between creates a good ambience – somekind of positive interaction.

2. *Never get into an argument or a lengthy discussion* – cut them after 60 seconds and take it offline.

3. There are sections of people in the audience who ask questions – simply to say something they know or advertise about their company or announce to everyone that the food was bad or to say that they know the subject more than you do. If you suspect the question to be on these lines, interrupt the person immediately and *request them to ask the "Actual" question they have in mind.*

4. *Never let a question be answered by a member of audience.* If you do it, then you will completely loose the audience and it will become a discussion session. You are the boss during your presentation, so ascertain your rights.

5. If you get a *question for which you are unsure of, politely say that you need to check on the facts before answering.* Ask them to speak to you after session or tell them that you will check and email them back.

Finally relax, take your first presentation easy. Either good or bad, you will remember it for your life!!!