Tips for giving presentations at university

Content and Purpose

a) Be clear what your aim is. Is it to inform, persuade, argue a point, or demonstrate your knowledge of a topic? Have you been given a title or a precise brief? Make sure you are clear what these are. This will help you to select and organise the relevant information.
b) Be aware of the needs of the audience. What do they need to know? How will they best understand it? What are they likely to know already?
c) If you are being assessed for this presentation find out what criteria are being used to grade you and study them carefully.
d) Demonstrate analysis – show that you have thought about the topic.

Organisation

a) Decide how many main points you want to include and how you want to organise them. This could be thematically, chronologically or by the relative importance of the information.
b) Be guided by how much time you have for the presentation – in ten minutes you can only cover about four or five main points.
c) Make sure your introduction includes a brief overview of what you are going to include in your talk.
d) Use signposting to guide the audience (phrases such as: firstly, secondly, now I will move on to, to conclude, etc.)
e) Recap main points in a brief summary as part of the conclusion.

Preparation and Practice

a) Brainstorm what you already know about your topic.
b) Identify gaps in your knowledge.
c) Select your sources, read and research to find out more.
d) Consider what to include and what is less relevant.
e) Prepare your notes in a style that will suit you.
f) Practise the full presentation in front of a friend or a group of friends.
g) Ask for specific and constructive feedback and act on it.
h) Check timing and adjust content. Practise again.
i) Anticipate questions.
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j) Check the room, the equipment, the layout, the acoustics.

Visuals/Support

a) Remember that visuals are for support; they are not a substitute for content.
b) Consider the needs of the audience when thinking about quantity of information to include.
c) Use relevant diagrams and illustrations and guide your audience carefully to key information.
d) Keep a consistent design to help the audience to focus.
e) Use a simple, easily legible font style which will be visible from the back of the room.

Delivery

a) Make sure your opening is positive and upbeat and introduce yourself.
b) Check that your voice is loud enough.
c) Use sentence stress and intonation to highlight main points and avoid a monotonous delivery.
d) Enunciate clearly.
e) Language – be confident with key vocabulary and key concepts by checking them in advance.
f) Include variety of pace. Slow down for main points and pause so the audience can absorb key information.
g) Use eye contact and look at the whole audience.
h) Be aware of non-verbal communication. Consider what your body language is saying to the audience. Keep an open posture, facing the audience.

Coping with potential problems and questions

a) Practise with friends or family several times so that you know your material inside out.
b) Arrive early.
c) Look at the friendliest faces in the audience.
d) Think of some relaxation techniques that work for you and use them.
e) Know exactly how you will start – plan the first section in great detail.
f) Bring water in case you go dry.
g) Remember that going blank or missing out a point happens to everyone. Don’t let it throw you for the rest of the presentation.
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h) When you are asked a question, pause, then restate the question so that the rest of the audience know what was asked. Answer to the best of your ability. If you can’t answer, be honest, but suggest a source where the answer could be found.

Post-presentation

a) Reflect on strong and weak points
b) Ask for feedback – use this constructively
c) Identify one or two areas for improvement
d) Be positive – this is a learning process!