Professional Methods

Conference Presentations (and Job Talks)

I. As in any performance, the vast majority of the work comes prior to the actual presentation.
(1)   Prepare your presentation and handout (or PowerPoint slides[1]) with great care. Have a clear point to make and be certain that everything in the presentation helps you make that point. Make explicit the relevance of your point to broader issues in the field.
(2)   Include all relevant data and all relevant references.
(3)   Do a practice run or two on your own with a stop watch and a tape recorder.
(4)   Do a practice talk or two in front of an audience including, especially, some people not already familiar with your work (and invite them to ask really hard questions).
(5)   Be prepared enough to allow yourself to be spontaneous; preparation will also help you handle the unexpected.
(6)   Make sure any text you are speaking from **precisely** matches the handout or slides with respect to section numbering and headings and example numbers.
(7)   Anticipate any likely questions or objections. Incorporate answers to really obvious ones in the presentation. Be ready for the others in the question period. Decide ahead of time what questions you want people to ask at the end of your talk, and design it to steer towards those questions. If people at your practice talks ask questions you would rather not have to deal with, figure out what in your talk brought out those question and fix it. But have answers for those question, and all others that have come up, or are likely to come up, prepared just in case.

II. The handout, or slide show
(8)   Have <u>**everything**</u> relevant on it. Don't expect to use the blackboard for something you need, either example, or tree, or derivation. And don't expect the audience to understand something they can't see.
(9)   Number everything. It's fine, even desirable, to have some prose summaries scattered throughout the handout. But consider numbering them too, otherwise there will be no efficient way to direct the audience's attention to them.
(10)   If you like, divide the handout or slide show into titled and numbered sections. But **don't** restart the example numbering in each section. Few things are as confusing as having seven examples all numbered (3).
(11)   This one is just a personal quirk of mine, but I find it confusing and distracting when examples, tables, figures, charts, all have their own separate numbering systems. It makes it impossible to rapidly find anything, and it is crucial that your audience be able to find everything rapidly.
(12)   Include a list of references. It doesn't have to be in official journal format, but provide enough information that anything you refer to can be tracked down.
(13)   Include your university, address, and e-mail address.

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[1]I virtually always use handouts, so some of my comments might need to be adjusted for slide use. For a job talk, ask which they prefer.

III. The presentation.

(14)   Be confident (not apologetic), forceful (not withdrawn). Your ideas are as good as anyone's (and better than many).

(15)   Probably the most significant correlates of effective teaching are enthusiasm, organization, clarity, and the ability to engage your audience. In a job talk, make sure to display all of these.

(16)   For a conference, take exactly the allotted time, neither less nor more. (At many conferences, more isn't even a possibility. You will be cut off in mid sentence if you run over.) Even for a job talk, where you won't actually be cut off, don't take more than the time you were told. (If you aren't told in advance, ask. And ask whether that specified time includes question period or not.)

(17)   Use your voice well. Project; speak to those in the back of the room. If you are reading your text - something I don't recommend unless you find it absolutely necessary - avoid the trap of speaking to your papers or your computer screen. You must speak to the audience. Modulate your voice. Provide plenty of acoustic cues as to what is most important.

(18)   Don't talk too slow or (more likely) too fast. (You will have checked this earlier with your tape recorder.)

(19)   Start strong. Make it clear just what your point will be and why it is important.

(20)   For a job talk, try to find out who will be attending. If it will be a mixed audience, avoid highly technical or specialized terms, or at least explain them in more general terms.

(21)   Refer to your examples by number. (Have you heard a presentation where this rule wasn't followed? It was very confusing, wasn't it?)

(22)   Read your examples, if they are in a language you speak. Read the gloss too if the language isn't English. This might sound to you like a waste of precious time, but it isn't. If you just zoom through the talk simply mentioning example or paradigm numbers, nobody will be able to follow you. The audience needs time to digest the data, the patterns, the generalizations, and you give them this time by reading the examples. (One exception: if you have several examples that all illustrate the same point, just read the first and say that the others are parallel.)

(23)   As you proceed, make the logic of the argument crystal-clear. Be fully explicit about what you are assuming and why, and how the conclusions follow from the premises. (And somehow without 'blowing your own horn' excessively, make sure to indicate what is new in your presentation.)

(24)   End strong, with a good statement of what you have accomplished. Conclude with an applause line, and don't spoil it by 'stepping on it'.

IV. Handling questions.

(25)   Do not adopt a hostile attitude. Treat all questions and comments as if they are helpful. (Some of them actually are! Most people aren't out to get you.)

(26)   Repeat or restate every question before you begin to answer it. This accomplishes at least three things. First, chances are that most of the audience didn't hear the question. Second, it might have been stated unclearly. You can clarify it. Finally, restating it gives you a chance to figure out how you want to answer it.

(27)   Once in a while you will get a really moronic question. Don't denigrate it, don't ignore it. As you restate it, try to turn it into something relevant.

(28)   When you get a comment or suggestion rather than a question, elaborate on it a bit, and be sure to thank the commenter (but don't merely do the latter).

(29)   Sometimes you will get a good, clear, relevant, and devastating question. What
         do you do? As you restate the question, show exactly what is hard about it.
         Then, maybe, show how it is even HARDER than it initially appeared. (This
         shows that you take the question seriously; it can also elicit some sympathy from
         the audience.) Then speculate about a direction, admitting, if necessary, that the
         direction doesn't look too initially promising. Or else, possibly argue that the
         phenomenon is actually problematic for everyone (thus relying on standard
         linguists' anti-syllogistic reasoning in such matters: This is a problem for all
         linguists. I am a linguist. Therefore this is not problematic for me.).

V. After your talk.
(30)   At a conference, hang around during the break following your
         presentation. (This will obviously be the case for a job talk.) Audience
         members might want to discuss your ideas further. If you see people who
         offered questions or suggestions, thank them and engage them in
         discussion.
(31)   Sometimes you will feel you didn't do a very good job, yet someone will come up
         to you congratulating you on a nice presentation. There is ONLY ONE suitable
         response: "Thank you very much. I'm glad you liked it." There is **no** value at all
         in replying that the talk wasn't any good. For one thing, it's never a very good
         move to denigrate yourself. Even more importantly, doing so in that situation
         embarrasses someone who was trying to be nice, by implying that s/he is a moron
         for liking a bad talk.