Some Rules for Making a Presentation

Here's a 5-minute Powerpoint talk with the essentials.

**Golden rule**

* Human attention is very limited. Don't cram too much information, either in each slide, or in the whole talk. Avoid details: they won't be remembered anyway.
* Organization
* **Have a very clear introduction** to present the problem you want to solve. The introduction is not technical in nature, but strategic (i.e. why this problem, big idea).

**Use only one idea per slide.**

* Have **a good conclusion slide**: put there the main ideas, the ones you really want people to remember. Use only one "conclusions" slide.

The conclusion slide should be the last one. Do not put other slides after conclusions, as this will weaken their impact.

* Having periodic "talk outline" slides (to show where you are in the talk) helps, especially for longer talks. At least one "talk outline" slide is very useful, usually after the introduction.
* Try to cut out as much as possible; **less is better.**
* Help the audience understand where you are going. Often it's best to give them a high-level overview first, and then plunge into the details; then, while listening to the details they can relate to the high-level picture and understand where you are. This also helps them save important brain power for later parts of the talk which may be more important.

**Mechanics**

* Use a good presentation-building tool, like PowerPoint. **Good looks** are important
* **Humor is very useful**; prepare a couple of and jokes beforehand (but not epic jokes, which require complicated setup). However, if you're not good with jokes, better avoid them altogether. Improvising humor is very dangerous.
* The more you rehearse the talk, the better it will be. A rehearsal is most useful when carried out loud. **5 rehearsals is a minimum** for an important talk.
* **The more people criticize your talk** (during practice), **the better it will be**; pay attention to criticism, not necessarily to all suggestions, but try to see what and why people misunderstood your ideas.
* **Not everything has to be written down**; speech can and should complement the information on the slides.
* Be enthusiastic.
* Act your talk: explain, ask rhetorical questions, act surprised, etc.
* **Give people time to think** about the important facts by slowing down, or even stopping for a moment.
* Do not go overtime under any circumstance.
* **Listen to the questions** very **carefully**; many speakers answer different questions than the ones asked.
* **Do not treat your audience as mentally-impaired**: do not explain the completely obvious things.

**Text**

* Slides should have **short titles**. A long title shows something is wrong.
* Use uniform capitalization rules.
* All the text on one slide should have the same structure (e.g. complete phrases, idea only, etc.).
* Put **very little text on a slide**; avoid text completely if you can. Put no more than **one idea per slide** (i.e. all bullets should refer to the same thing). If you have lots of text, people will read it faster than you talk, and will not pay attention to what you say.
* Don't use small fonts.
* Do not put useless graphics on each slide: logos, grids, affiliations, etc.
* Spell-check. A spelling mistake is an attention magnet.

**Illustrations**

* Use suggestive graphical illustrations as much as possible. Prefer an image to text. try to have 80% of the slides with images.
* Do not put in the figures details you will not mention explicitly. The figures should be as schematic as possible (i.e. no overload of features).
* **Do not "waste" information by using unnecessary colors**. Each different color should signify something different, and something important. Color-code your information if you can, but don't use too many different colors. Have high-contrast colors.
* **A few real photos related to your subject look very cool** (e.g. real system, hardware, screen-shots, automatically generated figures, etc**.). Real photos are much more effective during the core of the talk than during the intro**. I hate talks with a nice picture during the introduction and next only text; they open your appetite and then leave you hungry.
* For some strange reason, rectangles with shadows seem to look much better than without (especially if there are just a few in the figure).
* Sometimes a **matte pastel background looks much better than a white one.**
* Exploit animation with restraint. **Do not use fancy animation effects if not necessary**.
* However, there are places where animation is extremely valuable, e.g., to depict the evolution of a complex system, or to introduce related ideas one by one.
* **Use strong colors for important stuff**, **pastel colors for the unimportant**.
* Encode information cleverly: e.g. make arrow widths showing flows proportional to the flow capacity.
* Use thick lines in drawings (e.g. 1 1/2 points or more).

**(c) 2003-2005 by Mihai Budiu.** This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 2.5 License. Feel free to use it for any purpose, including commercial, as long as you properly quote me.