Hubert Heinen's Helpful Hints for Presenters of Conference Papers

1. Decide on your focus, on what you want your audience to go away with, as soon as possible. Concentrate in what you have to say on this focus, and excise any comments (parenthetical remarks) that detract from it.

2. Remember that your paper is intended to be read to an audience, probably one not too familiar with what you wish to say. Explain terms; avoid arcane jargon (unless you know your audience shares it); set signposts to signal where you are going [I personally don't like "I am going to discuss a, b, and c"; however, a, b, and c must be stated clearly and prominently at the onset of your remarks as thesis statements and repeated where they are discussed in detail]; keep your language simple (but varied); go from the known to the new.

3. Most of us typically give papers derived from something we plan to publish or intend as a first draft of a projected article. This is fine, especially since we should strive to be making a cutting-edge contribution to anything we talk about (nothing is deadlier than a conference paper clearly identifiable as a recycled seminar paper from the [often distant] past); however, a written text is not a suitable spoken text.

   Sketch your arguments and insights; then restate them, in a simplified manner, in a form comprehensible by a listening audience. Use a bit more repetition than you would for a written text (but don't overdo it); highlight your main points more obtrusively. Use your conclusion to tie your comments together, and make it quite clear what the conclusion is (it is always awkward when a paper comes to a close and no one in the audience realizes that it has).

4. Prepare a handout and/or slides, overhead transparencies, or video / computer-generated visuals. Any text you quote or discuss in detail should be presented (retyped; formatted for easy reading; neat; clearly marked so you can refer to it succinctly and unambiguously). Any secondary literature you refer to should be given in your handout. Note that slide and overhead projectors are tempramental; always try them out well in advance of your presentation, and have at least one copy of what they contain as a handout master in case you find that you will not be able to use the projector.
If the text you are discussing is likely to be difficult for your audience, e.g., in Latin or Middle High German, you should strongly consider providing a translation as well. (This may also apply to German texts for audiences that may include more than scholars of German studies.)

By the way, it is a good idea to put your name (and, possibly, address), the title of your talk, the conference name, and the date on your handout. That helps those who might want to keep it. If nothing else, it will help you remember later where and when you gave the paper. Yes, it is possible to forget this.

5. Practice delivering your paper. Highlight the main points so that you remember to give them emphasis. Time your paper several times (reading it out loud, as if to an audience).

If it runs too long, make judicious deletions. In general, do not delete whole sections, but rather less important supporting arguments. Rewrite bridges if necessary.

Never come to the conference with a text three times too long and skip around from section to section making up summaries of what you are skipping as you go along.

Practice the paper, perhaps before a mirror, until you feel comfortable looking up at an audience and making eye contact as frequently as possible, especially when presenting your main points.

6. Never give a presentation off the cuff. If you do not want to (or are not supposed to) read a paper, practice your presentation so many times that you know exactly what you want to say and how long it will take.

The British style, no longer as common as it once was, is to come to the podium with a prepared talk, lay a sheaf of paper on the podium, and ostentatiously refrain from looking at it at all. Some of the most effective speakers deliver a prepared paper by only using highlighted sections of it as springboards for a free presentation.

If you do this, put clear time markers in your outline or whatever you are using as a presentation aid at key points in your argument (e.g., at two minutes into your talk you should have covered points a and b); the main points you wish to cover should be clearly highlighted. Make absolutely sure that you can speak freely, remain clear, and stay well within your time limit.

Be honest with yourself. A free presentation is the ideal, but a paper read well is far more effective than a free presentation done poorly.

7. Make absolutely certain well beforehand what your time limit is. Stay well within it. Implore the section chair to allow questions after each paper; otherwise, your place in the program or the verbosity of another speaker can preclude your getting a response to your ideas. (Yes, you do want a response, even if it is not wholly positive.)