Important differences in organization, transitions, and context.

Oral presentations need many of the same things that a good written paper does-thesis, evidence, organization, etc. Consider, however, the main difference between a presentation and a paper: your words are gone the minute you speak them. With a paper, the reader can re-read a sentence that was unclear. The reader can scan ahead to preview how long the paper is or even skip to the conclusion before returning to read the body. The reader can pause when distracted or to look up an unfamiliar word. As a speaker, you must compensate for these differences to ensure that your listener receives your intended message.

**Organization & Transitions:**  
An old truism calls on speakers to “Tell them what you’re going to tell them. Tell them. And then tell them what you told them.” While no one wants you to repeat your content three times, you should certainly signal your organization at beginning, middle, and end. Repetition of key points also helps.

* Early in your talk, preview the organization of your presentation for your audience. For example,
  + “First I will describe the history of this painting. Then I’ll describe how its elements have been interpreted in the past. And finally, I will explore more modern controversies and how they connect to the book we just finished reading.”
  + “Climate scientists believe that this phenomenon has at least four contributing causes. I will describe each for you before looking at the evidence for its impacts and some possible policies to address these impacts.”
* During the body of your presentation provide more signals.
  + Use transition phrases like “the second cause,” “the final point,” “in addition to,” etc.
  + Recap to remind your listeners of prior information or to clarify points they may have missed. For example, if you are making several major points and discussing each for five minutes, your audience would probably appreciate a recap before you move to the last point. “So far I have described effect a, which was important for reason b, and effect c, which was important for reason d. Now let’s consider the final effect e, which is the most important of all.”
  + Remind the listeners of your structure when you make major transitions. “Now that I have described the theoretical background, I will present the data we collected.”
  + Repeat key words so that listeners can make connections
  + Use slight pauses for emphasis and capture the listeners’ attention and signal changes

**The Introduction:**  
Start your presentation with something to capture the attention of your audience. Give them a reason to be interested and attentive. Give them a reason to be supportive of you as the speaker. Consider starting with

* an attention-grabbing statistic,
* a striking or controversial quotation,
* an intriguing question, or
* a connection to something they are already care about

“According to the CDC, each year over 500 Americans die from bacterial meningitis. As the Center for Disease Control and Prevention points out on their website, college freshmen are among the most vulnerable groups. Have you been vaccinated?” Notice how these opening sentences capture the audience’s attention, establish the validity of their content via the authority of the CDC, and connect directly to an audience of college students who may think that such diseases primarily affect older people. The opening has been tailored to the audience.

If you are speaking about your senior research project to a group of faculty from your department, you don’t need to worry so much about capturing their attention. Your introduction might focus more on putting your work in context or establishing why the work was valuable. “As you probably know, students who worked with Dr. B in the past have investigated x, y, and z. Their results raised an intriguing question about q, which leads to my project.”

DO NOT start an academic or professional presentation with a joke. It is fine to say something amusing, but jokes unrelated to the content of your presentation are not appropriate. Jokes also risk offending or annoying members of your audience. You are trying to get them interested in your content.

While you should not try to memorize your presentation, the first sentence or two of your introduction may be an exception. Knowing precisely what you want to say and how you want to say those first sentences establishes your confidence in yourself and the audience’s confidence is you as well. Practice the first couple sentences of your presentation until the flow easily and confidently almost without you needing to think about things. Then relax into the body of your presentation

**The Conclusion:**  
As you near the end of your presentation, use signals such as “in conclusion” or “finally.” Your audience will take this as a signal to pay special attention. Remind the audience of your thesis (main point) and the most important supporting points. Do a quick re-cap and have a strong final statement. Listen to the end of several speeches given by other to see how they signal the end of the presentation. Voice intonation and body language can matter almost as much as the speaker’s words.

Similar to your introduction, you want to practice your concluding sentences carefully. Know exactly what you want to say. End strong. Don’t finish a good presentation weakly by saying, “Well I guess that is about all I have to say.” Your final words leave the final impression. If the format for your presentation includes answering questions afterwards, give your strong final statement tying back to your thesis and then say something like, “and now I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.”

**Word Choice:**  
The language in an oral presentation if generally a bit less formal than it would be in a paper on the same topic. Choose simpler words and sentence constructions. Remember, you audience can’t re-read to clarify. As the speaker, you must insure that they understand you the first time. Keep your audience in mind. Your word choices must match your audience. A history presentation to a group of history professors should be quite different than if you were presenting on the same topic to a group of freshman taking their first college history course.

**Amount of Content:**  
The amount of information and the detail you can convey will usually be less in a presentation than in a paper. A typical American speaks 120-150 words per minute. In a 5-minute presentation, you have time for perhaps 650-750 words. That is equivalent to 1.5 pages of single spaced type. And, you must leave room for signaling your organization. So, if you are asked to give a 5-minute presentation based on a 10-page paper you completed for the class, your biggest challenge may be choosing what to leave out.