Formal oral presentations in history are much like history papers: they are built around a forceful argument and strong support for that argument, often in the shape of primary and secondary historical evidence. Like a well-crafted paper, a great oral presentation will get the audience’s attention with an interesting introduction, then construct an argument and support it with clearly stated evidence (perhaps using visual aids if they will assist in audience understanding) and end with a conclusion which reinforces the presentations main idea.

As in a history essay, the sources (especially direct quotes and paraphrases) for a history presentation must be cited orally during the talk and in a printed bibliography. In addition, the speaker must research the audience for the presentation and take their knowledge base into account when preparing the speech, much as the history writer thinks of the “ideal reader” when writing an essay.

There are, however, a few differences between a written assignment and an oral presentation—in the speech, students must learn to deal with speech anxiety and they must utilize the techniques of good public speaking in regards to voice, pronunciation, volume, gestures, eye contact, and proper attire.

In addition to a formal presentation (the most commonly assigned speaking assignments in history classes) students in history classes might be asked to participate in...
debates, give group presentations, lead a discussion on a reading, or give a mini-lecture on a historical topic. If assigned one of these types of presentations, it is critical for students to communicate with their professor about the expectations for the assignment.

The Speaking Center on campus (http://www.usm.edu/speakingcenter/) can be extremely helpful to student preparing for any type of oral presentation or speaking assignment. The tutors at the center can assist students with all phases of preparing a presentation and can even offer constructive feedback on practice speeches. Their handouts are very helpful.