



# How to Deliver a TED Talk

Secrets of the World's Most Inspiring Presentations

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## Take-Aways

- Plan the end of your TED Talk before you conceive the beginning.
- Your TED Talk must “sow a single seed of inspiration.”
- Present your “single unifying message” in an unforgettable way.
- Your catchphrase should be as short as possible.
- Begin your talk with a truly personal, unique story.
- No matter how long your speech is, deliver it in three sections:
- “Tell the audience what you are going to tell them; tell them; and then tell them what you told them.”
- Your story must trigger your listener’s right- and left-brain cognition.
- Combine statistics and dry facts with “emotional stories.”
- Remember that the audience wants you to do a great job.

## Rating (10 is best)

Overall	Applicability	Innovation	Style
7	8	7	7

## Relevance

### What You Will Learn

In this summary, you will learn: 1) What TED is, 2) How to prepare a TED presentation and 3) How to deliver it.

### Recommendation

Author Jeremy Donovan knows TED. An experienced Toastmaster, he applies a deep understanding of the dynamics of public speaking to the format of the renowned TED presentations. He adopts a straightforward, everyman tone to remind readers that anyone – no matter how inexperienced – can address a TED audience successfully. Donovan’s advice makes a lot of sense in this easy-to-follow TED Talk template. Amusingly, he neither confirms nor denies that he ever spoke at a TED gathering. Rather, he writes that he “studied” many TED presentations to break down their structure, flow, strengths and weaknesses. *getAbstract* recommends the fruits of his avid study to anyone aspiring – or scheduled – to speak at a TED convocation, as well as to everyone who wants to organize and present material effectively.

## Summary

*“TED presenters are just like you and me – ordinary individuals with extraordinary stories.”*

*“If you survived into adulthood, then you have countless stories of perseverance in the face of failure.”*

*“Every part of your speech, the opening, the body and the conclusion, offers an opportunity to tell a story.”*

### TED: “Technology, Entertainment and Design”

TED, a nonprofit organization dedicated to sharing forward-thinking concepts and practices from the arenas of technology, entertainment and design, organizes “exclusive conferences” and posts presentations from those conferences online for free viewing. Each TED Talk takes place in front of a live audience and must take 18 minutes or less. The world’s most successful entrepreneurs, most brilliant scientists and most famous pop stars have all given TED Talks, as have thousands of lesser-known, hardworking people. You can tell your own inspirational tales at TED – or anywhere – if you can harness and share your emotions in a compelling narrative.

Have you struggled to overcome an obstacle? Have you persevered despite disaster? Has something or someone you love been taken from you? Can you recount an ordinary drama in an “extraordinary story”? To reach listeners’ hearts and minds, harness your story’s feelings, inspiration and impact, and present them in an organized, cogent structure.

### The “Ten Commandments”

TED provides a list of do’s and don’ts – its Ten Commandments of content and delivery. This set of “best practices” says: 1) Avoid clichéd “shtick”; 2) share a big vision or a new idea; 3) “tell a story”; 4) don’t sell; 5) welcome laughter; 6) share your “curiosity” and “passion”; 7) refer to other speakers to generate “connection” or “controversy”; 8) be “vulnerable” and not egotistical; 9) don’t “read your speech”; and 10) finish on time.

### Getting Started

The person who introduces you most likely will know nothing about you. TED events feature so many speakers that almost no one pays attention to the introductions. If the beginning of your speech will be compromised if the audience doesn’t know something about you, write a one-minute – no more than that – intro for the emcee to read. The best opening is a “really personal” story that relates precisely to your basic message and uses someone else as the hero. A shocking statement opens well only if you back it up

*“The most consistently successful opening is the personal story.”*

*“The problem is not that you don’t have enough stories, it is that you have too many.”*

*“Stories with positive endings are highly effective for motivation. In contrast, cautionary tales are more effective for teaching.”*

*“Once you have your central idea, work backward to build an audience-centric narrative with layers of stories and facts.”*

in your subsequent remarks. To provoke emotional responses, ask a potent or unsettling question instead of giving startling statistics. Asking “why” gains more attention than asking “how.” Never open with a quote or a joke. Never open with anything remotely offensive, sexist, racist or taken from the comic strip “Dilbert.” Never say: “Before I begin”, since you have already begun.

After your opening, create a bridge to the main body of your talk. For instance, ask your audience members to picture themselves in a certain set of circumstances. For example, MIT researcher Deb Roy asked people to “imagine if you could record everything you said and did in your life.” Describing the benefits of your speech will make people excited about learning from you. Tell your listeners what they’ll know by the time you finish. You might say: “You will walk out of here with the three A’s of happiness.” Offer three “steps, three themes, three strategies, three techniques, three tools.”

### Content that Inspires

The point of your TED Talk is to inspire your audience. To that end, always consider how you will finish your talk even before you draft the beginning. Ask yourself, “What is the most amazing story I can tell?” What was your happiest or saddest moment? What is the most significant lesson you ever learned? When you’ve chosen your theme, build your story. Include the person who taught you your greatest lesson because “the most inspiring stories position someone else as the hero.” The seven most popular TED Talks – as measured by page views – address six areas: “mental illness, creativity, leadership, happiness, motivation and self-worth.” Other sought-after TED Talks focus on “public health, public education and diversity.”

Compose your talk to fulfill or express everyone’s four crucial needs: “Love and belonging, desire and self-interest, learning and growing,” and “hope and change.” To present these concepts properly, choose a single, powerful unifying idea. Never describe multiple experiences that added up to create a life change. Pick one event or idea to maintain as a touchstone throughout your talk.

To make your presentation memorable, select a brief “catchphrase” or slogan that sums up your point. A perfect coda includes a “call to action” that either rhymes – think of attorney Johnny Cochran’s legendary “If it doesn’t fit, you must acquit” – or uses a musical rhythm, like TED speaker Simon Sinek’s “Start with Why,” which is also the name of his book. Your catchphrase provides the perfect context for you and your speech. Usually, an introduction provides that context, but that won’t happen at TED.

### “Building Your Speech”

“Tell the audience what you are going to tell them; tell them; then tell them what you told them.” Your opening is your “what” section: the “tell them” section is the body of your speech. Assemble your talk into those three sections. Pick and stick to one of three narrative frameworks:

- **“Situation-complication-resolution”** – Describe your situation. “Hook” your crowd with why your situation – and by implication, the broader universe in which it takes place – is dangerous or complicated. Finish by offering a solution that settles the issue and makes use of the opportunities you cited at the outset.
- **“Chronological”**– Begin with the start of a historical period, your childhood or the moment that launched your learning journey. Work through the time frame to your conclusion. This structure may be easiest and most comfortable for first-time speakers.

*“Compelling stories force the hero to choose between two goods, or more commonly, two evils.”*

*“In your talk, every key point should be delivered with a powerful one-two punch of story and fact.”*

*“Public speaking should be an amplified version of everyday conversation.”*

*“The best TED speakers use the word ‘you’ twice as much as they use the word ‘I.’”*

- **“Ideas-concepts”** – The best example of this framework is David Letterman’s “Top Ten List.” For example, Richard St. John shared “eight secrets of success.” Once your audience knows that your talk follows this structure, they will assume that you’re building to a climax with the last item on your list.

## Your Narrative

Structure your speech so each section triggers each listener’s right or left brain. Narratives and action appeal to the “emotional right brain,” while “facts, strategies, tips and techniques” stir up the left. Your goal is to convince your listeners to alter their views of a situation or to act. Thus, you must lead them on an “emotional journey.” Cite facts to convince them of your credibility and to convince the skeptical left brain. Combine facts with tales of true emotion to engage the right brain. Explain any statistics in a way that develops your audience’s emotional connection to your cold, hard facts. For example, instead of saying “70 million Americans have heart disease,” say, “Look around this room. One in four of you has heart disease, and it will kill you.”

Construct parts of your story in question form. Engage your audience by asking them to put themselves in the situation you describe. Or, ask if they ever have been in a similar quandary and how they escaped.

The most effective tales are your own – from your life, your work, your relationships, your successes, your failures. But never make yourself the hero. You are your audience’s “equal, their guide.” Tell a personal story that casts someone else as the hero: your spouse, a teacher, your boss, a stranger on a bus...anybody but you. Don’t explain everything. Let your audience come to you as listeners discover the layers of your tale. Never worry about being objective. Reveal yourself and your feelings. Underscore every emotion with a fact and every fact with an emotion.

Your story needs a plot. Stick to the basics. Begin with the characters, place them in “emotion-provoking” jeopardy, resolve their conflict and state the conclusions that their struggle teaches. If you cite certain “character traits,” your audience will more readily identify with you. Describe your characters vividly. Act out their speech or behavior. Represent each character with a specific stage position. When you speak as Character *A*, stand in one spot. When you speak as Character *B*, move to another. Always return to each character’s precise stage location before you speak in that person’s signature voice or act out a particular behavior.

Create increasingly intense obstacles or difficulties for your characters to overcome. Having them choose between good and evil is boring. They should choose between the lesser of two evils or between two goods. Make sure your story actually ends – that is, features a satisfying plot conclusion that’s happy or sad, “positive or negative.” Happy endings inspire calls for action. Sad endings teach lessons. The end of the story is your chance “to transfer wisdom.”

## “Delivery”

Strive for a low-key, conversational tone. Don’t preach; don’t shout; don’t whisper; don’t hurry. Avoid slang or jargon. Speak in simple, complete sentences. Most TED presenters use language on the “sixth-grade level.” Shed any filler speech habits, such as “uh, well, you know” or “like.” Speak in “bursts” of words or sentences spaced out by pauses. This will heighten the suspense and make your audience pay attention. Vary the speed and volume of your speech. Be aware of your breathing. Nervous people draw shallow breaths,

*“As you start your actual presentation, remember that your audience wants you to succeed.”*

*“People don’t sit in a chair for hours on end listening to other people speak unless they are going to get a return on the investment of their time and attention.”*

*“An eternal debate rages as to whether the last words out of your mouth should be ‘thank you’.”*

so breathe deeply. Speak slower than feels right. Many people assume they are speaking more slowly than they are. Say “you” as often as possible to engage your audience. Don’t say “you all” or “you guys” or “y’all.” Say “you.”

Forty percent of the most popular TED Talks presenters don’t show slides. If you must use slides, pay a professional designer to create them. In both design and the number of slides, less is always more: the fewer the fonts, the fewer the colors and the fewer the slides, the better.

Be aware of your body position. Unless you’re acting out a character, rest your hands comfortably at your sides. Stand “symmetrically,” with your weight equally balanced on both feet. Avoid these common mistakes:

- **“Fig leaf”** – Clapping your hands before your body makes you look shy and powerless.
- **“Pockets”** – Take your hands out of your pockets, or you’ll look too casual.
- **“Parade rest”** – Don’t cross your hands behind your back. You’ll look rigid.
- **“Hips”** – Don’t stand with your hands on your hips; you’ll look angry or scolding.
- **“Crossed arms”** – This stance makes you look domineering, as if you’re daring someone to challenge you.
- **“Touching”** – If you touch your face, head or hair, you’ll look nervous.

Smile at your audience, but don’t overdo it. Make eye contact with as many people as you can. Don’t hold it too long – that would be staring. Don’t break away too soon – that makes you look jittery. “Three to five seconds” is the best eye-contact interval. Unless you are acting out characters, stay in one place. Of course, you should be well-dressed and well-groomed.

### Wrapping Up

Never say: “and in conclusion.” Say: “Now we come to the end of our journey.” Speak in shorter sentences near the end. Avoid summing up; you’re not delivering a “book report.” No one has forgotten what you said. Ideally, your last sentence will deliver your most important point, one that could stand alone. You could finish by exhorting your audience with “a powerful call to action” or by asking a shocking or potent question. Some people think you should always end by saying “thank you.” Others think that it weakens the impact of your final moment onstage. Regardless, almost everyone finishes a TED Talk by thanking the members of the audience.

### Handling Stage Fright

Most people fear public speaking. To deflect nervousness, invest in preparation. Arrive early. Check the podium – make sure there is one – and check the lights, the sound system, the microphone and the projector. Verify that your slides are in order. Examine your stage. Visualize how and where you will move. Your audience wants you to do well. No one is rooting for you to fail. You are among friends.

## About the Author

Group vice president of marketing at Gartner Inc., an IT research and advisory firm, **Jeremy Donovan** is a TEDx organizer and Toastmasters International member.