How to Create Your TED Talk: An 8-Step Process

First, A Little Background on TED

The TED conference (which stands for *technology, entertainment, design*) began life in 1984 as a yearly and very expensive conference where industry leaders and creative types gathered to exchange "Ideas Worth Spreading."

Back then, it was all about the *live* experience, and speakers were expected to bring some quirky spontaneity to the stage.

But fast forward more than 30 years, and TED has become an institution, spawning countless local "TEDx" events, putting hundreds of speeches online each year, getting millions upon millions of views, and changing the way we all think about public speaking!

So, What *IS* a TED Talk?

According to Chris Anderson, the owner and global curator of TED, ***every TED talk starts with an idea***:

"You have something meaningful to say, and your goal is to re-create your core idea inside your audience's minds."

—from ***TED Talks: The Official TED Guide to Public Speaking***

Anderson calls this idea "the gift in every great talk." Your idea may:

- Be common-sense ("Every kid needs a champion") or counter-intuitive ("The way we think about charity is wrong")
- Describe a scientific breakthrough ("How bacteria talk") or your own experience ("I am the son of a terrorist, here's how I chose peace")
- Motivate people to action ("We need to talk about an injustice") or greater self-awareness ("Your elusive creative genius")

But in every case, **your TED talk will begin with an idea.**

And whether or not your talk actually builds a model of your idea in your listeners' brain — Anderson takes that literally, and research on "neural coupling" backs him up — your TED talk exists to communicate this idea to your listeners.

That is your talk's one and only goal.

Other Qualities of Successful TED Talks

In ***TED's secret to great public speaking*** (an eight-minute video that's worth watching), Anderson offers three guidelines for creating your TED talk:

- **Focus on one major idea**

*Ideas are complex things; you need to slash back your content so that you can **focus on the single idea you're most passionate about**, and give yourself a chance to explain that one thing properly… Everything you say [should link] back to it in some way.*

- **Give people a reason to care**

*Stir your audience's curiosity. Use intriguing, provocative questions to identify why something doesn't make sense and needs explaining. If you can reveal **a disconnection in someone's worldview**, they'll feel the need to bridge that knowledge gap.*

- **Build your idea with familiar concepts**

*Build your idea, piece by piece, out of **concepts that your audience already understands**… A vivid explanation… delivers a satisfying ah-hah! moment as it snaps into place in our minds.*

These are important best practices, but they don't tell you what to *do* to create a TED talk.

For that, try this…

8-Step Process for Creating Your TED Talk

Step 1. Find an idea you want to share

To hone in on your idea worth sharing, it can be useful to ask yourself things like:

- What's one assumption I'd like to challenge?
- What's a belief of mine that has changed, and why?
- What does everyone miss when they think about my area of interest or expertise?

And remember, you're looking for an ***idea***. As Jeremey Donovan says in ***How to Deliver a TED Talk***,

…an idea is not a theme, a general truth, a platitude or a big goal. "Everyone wants to feel included" is not an idea, it's a general truth. "Empowering women" is not an idea, it's a topic.

Step 2. Develop an unexpected and/or catchy way to state your idea

If your idea can be stated in a catchy way, listeners will pay more attention and remember it more easily. Here are some examples (with more conventional versions of the same idea in parentheses):

- **We can solve malnutrition now** (vs. Malnutrition is a problem that is finally, in our day and age, able to be resolved by advances in science.)
- **Almost dying saved my life** (vs. A near death experience created the motivation for me to face and overcome problems that otherwise would have slowly killed me.)
- **Never, ever give up** (vs. Cultivate the ability to commit without wavering; it's an essential component of your lifelong success.)

Step 3. Collect anything and everything that relates to your idea

To re-create your idea in the minds of your listeners, you'll need vivid *examples, illustrations, stories, facts, questions, comments, etc.*

So take a few days to notice anything and everything that relates to your idea, and collect these materials by writing them down, taking photos, recording your thoughts as sound files, etc.

Examples of things you might collect include:

- a snippet of conversation
- a quote you heard in high school
- a story that relates to your idea
- a fact, or cluster of data that supports it
- a metaphor or analogy that helps explain it
- a personal moment in your relationship with the idea
- a physical object that will help your audience understand it (here, **my client Erika Frenkel presents an anesthesia machine**)

Basically, ***anything*** that comes to your mind at this stage should be collected.

And don't worry yet about which materials will end up in your talk.

You can't *collect* things and *evaluate* them at the same time, so just collect for now; you'll have a chance to evaluate later.

Step 4. Start imagining how you might open and end your talk

While it's too soon to *choose* your opening and close, it's not too soon to start playing with ideas for these important parts of your talk.

An effective way to begin any speech (not just a TED talk) is to ***grab your audience's attention*** — often with a human interest story, a surprising statistic, an unexpected observation, or a thought-provoking question.

There are probably some great attention-grabbers in the material you collected for Step 3. Pick one that you particularly like, and flag it as a possible **opening** for your talk.

As for the **close**, you'll probably want to **end your talk in a positive, forward-looking way**. This is often done by:

- calling the audience to action;
- painting a hopeful picture of the future; and/or
- "paying off" (finishing, resolving) a story or discussion that has run through your talk, so that listeners get a sense of closure.

With your provisional opening and close in mind, you're now ready to…

Step 5. Put the rest of your materials in a reasonable order

The middle of any speech is tricky, and a TED talk is particularly so, because TED talks can take just about any form you'd like.

So to tackle this part of your TED talk, take the materials you've collected and shuffle them until you find a good arrangement. To do this, you can:

- Create a high-level **outline** (leave out most of the detail, just arrange the big points or elements)

- Write each element (story, comment, observation, fact) on a **3 x 5 card** and physically shuffle them to see different possible orders. (You can do this on a table, or digitally, by creating one slide per element and shuffling them with PowerPoint's "slide sorter" feature)

- **Use sound** (speaking out loud) instead of writing to put your talk elements into different sequences (Ask: Does it sound right if I tell that story first, then give the fact? How about if I give the fact first, then tell the story?)

- Try *any* other method that works for you.

How will you know when the order is good?

Keep in mind that ***your goal is to create an understanding of your idea in the minds of your audience members***, and try to arrange your explanations, comments, and stories in a way that leads to that goal. (You'll get to test this on real people in Step 7.)

Trust your instincts: If something seems out of place to you, it probably is. Try moving it to a different part of your talk or even skipping it, and see if that works better.

And don't expect to find the best organization for your talk the first time you try, because that almost never happens!

Step 6. Talk your way to a rough draft of your script

This is where your "speaking plan" becomes a "speech."

Take your outline or list of ordered elements and ***talk about*** each item in turn.

When I'm writing a speech, I like to literally talk it out loud and type up what I'm saying as I'm saying it — but you can also use your computer's voice recognition software to capture your words, or talk into the voice memo feature on your phone (this used to be called "dictating") and type up the sound file later.

Why ***record yourself talking*** instead of just writing out the speech?

Because most of us get all formal and stiff when we write, and the ideal for a talk is that it sounds like you're… ***talking***!

And here's a hint:

As you do this step, pay particular attention to the way different elements (materials) that you've used in your talk are connected.

If, for example, you tell me that:

1. The river flooded, and
2. Some people moved out of the neighborhood…

I'll want to know: Did people move *because* the river flooded? Did most people stay *even though* the river flooded? Did the river flood *after* people had already moved?

When you spell things out clearly, people will form a clear picture of your point.

Step 7. Try out your Ted talk draft on a volunteer listener

The point of this step is to get feedback on how to improve the structure and clarity of your draft.

Ask someone you trust — a smart 10-year-old is perfect — to listen to your talk.

Read it to them (because you haven't finalized, let alone memorized, it yet), and then ask them:

- Did I explain my idea clearly?
- Was there anything in my talk that you didn't follow?
- Was there anything you didn't understand?
- Did anything seem out of place?
- Did I lose your interest anywhere?

If your listener wants to discuss the 6,000 facts you left out, or how your talk should *really* be about X instead of Y, gently lead them back to these questions.

The point is not to *change* your talk. The point is to *improve* it's effectiveness.

Step 8. Repeat the following steps as needed

1. Based on your listener's feedback, **make changes** that will improve your draft. But don't get carried away editing; if it ain't broke, don't fix it! (And keep your old drafts in case you want to go back to something you did earlier; I number mine v1, v2, v3, etc.)

2. **Practice delivering your new draft out loud.**

3. **Try out** your new draft on a volunteer listener, get their **feedback**, and **repeat these steps as often as needed** until your talk has taken a satisfying shape.

And finally…

There's no better time to start working on your talk than now. Even if your schedule is crammed, you're better off working for a few minutes each day than leaving everything to the last minute!

And as you work this process, remember that perfection isn't possible.

So instead of striving for perfection, prepare carefully, take your best shot, and try to ***relax***.

Your audience is going to love this talk — and you deserve to enjoy it, too!

Get Started

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- **Giving a TED-Style Talk? Here's How They're Different from Business Presentations**

- **TED Has Eliminated Two Things That Used to Be Said In Most Speeches: Hello and Thank You. Should You?**
- **Masterful Public Speaking: Daniel Kraft's TEDx Talk**

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I used your tips-for-introverts about (a) energy conservation prior to talks and (b) getting centered once up on stage just yesterday for some talks at Mayo and both tips were INCREDIBLY helpful and made a real difference.

Jeffery Huffman, M.D.Director, Cardiac Psychiatry Research Program, MGH; Associate Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School

Jezra's Public Speaking Books

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