Ultimate TED Talk Guide for Entrepreneurs



How to structure and deliver a TED Talk that listeners remember long after it ends.

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You don’t have to be a Nobel prize winner to create a TED Talk. In fact, there have been dozens of talks given by entrepreneurs. Recently I had the opportunity to visit TED headquarters and participate in the coveted TED masterclass to see what creating a TED Talk is all about.

The class is taught by Briar Goldberg, who has made a name for herself as a master communication strategist for Mark Zuckerberg and many other high-profile CEOs, in addition to her role as the Director of Speaking at TED.

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According to Goldberg, if we're not careful, even the most intelligent of us could be delivering speeches filled with clichés that leave our audience feeling disconnected. But done right, a talk is more powerful than anything in written form.

Find a single big idea that is larger than your organization

Chris Anderson, the Head of TED, explains in his guide to public speaking to look for a single big idea that is larger than your organization, but at the same time leverages your experience to show that it isn't just empty speculation. The goal Anderson says is to present just one idea as thoroughly and completely as you can in a limited timeframe.

"If everyone says the same thing, it means nothing," further explains Goldberg. "Try taking the topic, look for a unique angle and take a left turn."

Have a clear point

We really need to ask ourselves if what we're saying or how we're saying it that gives our audience something to hold onto. You don't want your audience sitting there thinking *will you get to the point already.*

Luckily, this can be avoided by a proper plan.

Your plan can't just consist of numbered bullet points, it must have a connected theme that ties together each of your narrative elements. Each element has to be a part of the overall idea you're building. In Hollywood, this is called a throughline (a term used for analyzing films, plays, and novels).

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The throughline is the driving force of your talk that pulls the audience from beginning to end and should be summed up in no more than a couple of sentences.

Don't: *"I want to share with you what I learned while visiting the TED headquarters. Then give you my opinion on creating a TED Talk."*

Do: *"While at TED headquarters I learned how to give a TED Talk. There's a very specific framework you can follow to identify your topic and deliver a speech that looks and sounds effortless."*

While the first set-up is somewhat interesting, the second set-up is far more enticing and will likely result in the audience taking out their notebooks before the talk even begins. Bonus points if you can add some unexpectedness.

Put your audience before the content

We often fail to think about how the audience receives information and how they make decisions. You might feel like the insights you have to share are profound, but that's because you have the full background and context on what you're presenting. Your audience does not.

Most audiences can be broken down into the following three categories:

1. Expert audience

Leads with logic: they are rational decision-makers and don't need the fluff, get directly to the point with logic/stats/data.

2. Novice audience

Leads with credibility: they are intuitive decision-makers and lean on your credibility and sources.

3. Emotional audience

Leads with stories, visuals, metaphors: all audiences are emotional decision-makers.

Be your audience’s tour guide

Think of your talk as a journey, one you and the audience take together and you’re the tour guide. If you want the audience to take a journey with you than you have to clue them in on where they’re going. If the audience knows where you’re headed it will be much easier for them to follow. Think about watching a movie and how confusing it is if you’ve never seen the trailer or had no idea about the plotline.

But don’t let the journey be too epic

Have you ever been to a new city and tried to see everything in one day? I bet you didn’t end up remembering too much about any particular attraction. Don’t let your talk end up being a day of exhausted site-seeing because you wanted to try to pack everything in. The journey you take with your audience should be about truly exploring the destination.

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Be a topic slasher

Identify which aspect you want to focus on and go in for a little more depth. Less is more, and the idea here is to cover

less so that you can go deeper and have a bigger impact. Be prepared to let go of things that are not part of your main narrative.

Many TED speakers have said that this was the key to getting their talk right. Keep slashing back the range of topics you want to cover until they become a single, connected thread (your throughline).

Speak to a person not a demographic

Pick someone and create your talk as if they're the only one you're talking to. Some experts advise choosing someone you're fond of so that energy comes across. This is a tactic I use frequently when I find myself struggling to write an article and it works every time!

Ask yourself questions

Anderson's book, *TED Talks: The Official TED Guide to Public Speaking*, provides a checklist of questions you should ask yourself:

- Is this a topic I'm passionate about?
- Does it inspire curiosity?
- Will it make a difference to the audience to have this knowledge?
- Is my talk a gift?
- Is the information fresh or is it already out there?
- Can I truly explain the topic in the time slot allocated, complete with necessary examples?
- Do I know enough about this to make a talk worth the audience's time?

- Do I have the credibility to take on this topic?
- What are the fifteen words that encapsulate my talk?
- Would those fifteen words persuade someone enough to be interested in hearing my talk?

Don’t force it

Think back to those long days at school sitting in a classroom, our bodies were present but our minds often tuned out whatever was being taught. That’s because knowledge can’t be pushed into a brain, it has to be pulled in.

So how does one pull knowledge into a brain? Start by making a human connection by making eye contact right from the start. Research has shown that two people staring at each other will trigger mirror neuron activity that mirrors the emotional state of the other person. Goldberg says the number one piece of advice she gives speakers on the day of their talk is to make regular eye contact with the audience.

Show vulnerability

Brené Brown gave an entire TED Talk on the topic of vulnerability. Vulnerability, Brown says, can be a tool you can always have in your back pocket if things start going left. However, Brown warns that oversharing is not vulnerability, nor is formulaic or contrived personal sharing as it can leave your audience feeling manipulated and often hostile towards you and your message. If you’re not sure about the authenticity of your vulnerability, Brown suggests you examine your intentions or seek the advice of an honest friend.

According to Goldberg, a speaker’s willingness to be vulnerable is one of the most powerful tools they can yield.

Make ‘em laugh (but not squirm)

Have you ever experienced a laugh with a complete stranger? Do you remember the instant connection that was formed? Laughing together creates a bond, the exact bond needed to captivate an audience. However, humor is a skilled art, and not everyone can do it. Bad humor is worse than no humor at all, so basically if you’re not already naturally funny it might be best to tread very lightly.

Let your audience figure you out for themselves

Nothing is worse than an inflated ego. The kind that forces an audience to sit through self-serving stories or irrelevant name dropping, we all know how that plays out. If leading with credibility is your intention, mention only what is necessary and trust the audience will discover how wonderful you are on their own.

To script or not to script

While many of us are comfortable with very little preparation time and speaking off the cuff, it’s never as good or impactful as a well-rehearsed talk. However, sounding scripted is a sure way to have your audience tune out, so be certain you’ve rehearsed enough times that your talk flows effortlessly.

Goldberg suggests to take a video of yourself giving your talk, and then listen to it with the volume turned off to see if your facial expressions are matching what you’re saying.

Be careful with those clichés

1. Pictures of your family that doesn’t relate to the talk.
2. Saying “studies suggest” – go right to the numbers and cite the source.
3. Predictable story structure– i.e. “Let me introduce you to John and tell you an interesting story about how our programs work in Tarzana”
4. Life “coach-isms”– Leave out acronyms ie. YOLO (You Only Live Once)
5. Overused phrases such as, “imagine a world,” “what if,” “as a…[insert job],” “raise your hand if”, “someone once said,” “this could change the world,” or a slide with bold letters and one word.
6. Quotes – Are an outdated way to engage audiences.

Now that you’re armed with the advice and guidance straight from the masterclass, you can be well on your way to creating the next viral talk and you won’t be the only one. There were about a dozen of us that participated in the masterclass. Some of us were given private invitations and others redeemed as much as 300,000 Marriott Bonvoy points for the experience. But we all had one thing in common, we were eager to learn TED’s proprietary training program that its most brilliant minds have completed!

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