

REVISED AND EXPANDED NEW EDITION

HOW TO DELIVER A TED TALK

*Secrets of the World's
Most Inspiring Presentations*



JEREMEY DONOVAN

Foreword by **RICHARD ST. JOHN**, author of *The 8 Traits Successful People Have in Common*

Afterword by **SIMON SINEK**, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Start with Why*

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Most Inspiring Presentations*

JEREMEY DONOVAN

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Choosing an Idea Worth Spreading

TIP 1: Everybody has an idea worth spreading.

After watching a TED Talk, most people feel at least two emotions. The first comes from the angel on your right shoulder whispering softly, “You can do anything. You can be anything. Go change the world.” It makes you tingle with a sense of exhilaration about how your life and the lives of the people around you will change as you apply this newfound knowledge. The second emotion comes from the devil on your left shoulder who sows self-doubt by screaming, “You will never be able to give a talk like that! You don’t even have a *good* idea, let alone a *great* idea. The only thing you have spent 10,000 hours over 10 years learning is how to watch television. You don’t have a glamorous job. Nothing amazing has ever happened to you.”

The first step in being able to deliver a TED Talk is telling the devil to go back to where he came from. He could not be more wrong. Just look at the evidence. For every Bill Gates, there are hundreds if not thousands of activists who have given talks about causes they have championed without the backing of a foundation with

an endowment exceeding \$30 billion. In fact, antipoverty activist Bunker Roy¹—hardly a household name—delivered a TED Talk that has had nearly three times as many views as Mr. Gates’s.² If you have transformed even one life for the better, including your own, then you have the seed of an idea worth spreading.

TIP 2: Choose your persona based on whether your primary objective is to educate, entertain, or inspire.

Before you say, “But, I’m not an activist,” remember that speeches have been given by people from nearly every walk of life. Though TED started in 1984 with a focus on bringing together people from the worlds of technology, entertainment, and design, the organization has intentionally broadened its scope. In my sampling of TED Talks, I have identified no less than 15 common personas, falling into three categories, that frequently grace the stage.

These 15 personas are neither mutually exclusive nor collectively exhaustive. You may recognize yourself in more than one of them, or you may find yourself in none. Day to day and moment to moment, each of us changes hats. The point is simply that projecting these personas onto yourself one at a time will help you narrow your focus. Since constraints unlock creativity, this technique will help you easily identify which idea you want to spread. In addition, whether your dominant mission is education, entertainment, or inspiration, make sure to include a healthy dose of the other two components with information, humor, or emotion.

Category 1. The Educators

Though every great TED Talk is a mixture of education, entertainment, and inspiration, speakers in this category tend to have a heavier focus on the education component. By educator, I use a rather broad definition that is inclusive of those who seek to understand the nature of nature, the nature of people, and the nature of

things people create. While not a requirement, these speakers often have advanced academic degrees in the sciences or engineering. The following four types of personas are in this category:

- *The inventor.* Inventors are the purveyors of cool. They share new technologies that promise to save us effort, entertain us, or even fulfill our dreams. From Pranav Mistry's SixthSense wearable electronics³ to Sebastian Thrun's driverless car,⁴ a large set of inventions discussed at TED focuses on the user experience with our gadgets. Ranking the most popular TED Talks by inventors reveals insights about our collective zeitgeist. One pattern that is telling—if not also a little funny—is that there is an unusually large concentration of TED Talks about things that fly, including robots, animals, and even people with jetpacks. The thirst for flight is more than a fad; it is a psychologically hardwired desire.
- *The life scientist.* Life scientists open our eyes to the wonders of living organisms, biological processes, and interrelationships among living things. As one might expect, the majority of the most viewed TED Talks by life scientists center on helping individuals understand their brains, stay healthy, and live longer. It appears that the same psychological survival instinct driving popularity for inventors is at play here. Three exceptional talks in this group include Jill Bolte Taylor's "Stroke of Insight,"⁵ Hans Rosling's "Stats That Reshape Your Worldview,"⁶ and Aubrey de Grey's "A Roadmap to End Aging."⁷
- *The natural scientist.* The laws of nature and the physical world—inclusive of astronomy, biology, chemistry, and physics—are made accessible to the masses by natural scientists. Through the words and images of these speakers, you can journey from subatomic particles (Brian Greene⁸), to underwater astonishments (David Gallo⁹), to the larger universe (Stephen Hawking¹⁰).

- *The social scientist.* Social scientists provide insights on the individual and collective human experience. Here, you will find two of the most popular TED Talks, Sir Ken Robinson’s “Schools Kill Creativity”¹¹ and Brené Brown’s “The Power of Vulnerability.”¹² A large number of these talks help us make sense of our emotions such as love, empathy, and shame. The best of the presenters, like Dr. Brown, turn what we commonly perceive as negative into positive. Social scientists are the originators of the research commonly cited by another role you will read about in a few moments, the personal guru.

Category 2. The Entertainers

With the educators securely tucked away, we turn our attention to the next group, the entertainers. While their dominant mode is quite obviously to entertain, the best speakers in this category teach us by sharing the secrets of their craft.

- *The comedian.* Despite the organization’s early commitment to entertainment, there are rather few TED Talks by comedians. Megastars like Jerry Seinfeld and Chris Rock rarely grace the TED stage. Sarah Silverman, a popular yet polarizing comedian, gave a rather explicit TED Talk in 2010 that is not available on YouTube or TED.com.¹³ Ms. Silverman shares why: “It was never officially released because [TED curator] Chris Anderson called it ‘god awful.’” Why so few comedians? The best comedy is pure entertainment. Professional comics need to deliver an astonishing four to six laughs per minute. To achieve a surprise every 10 seconds, they need to continually shift their direction, which makes it nearly impossible to construct an idea worth spreading. However, a few skilled performers managed to form a message out of the madness, including Charlie Todd,¹⁴ Ze Frank,¹⁵ Reggie Watts,¹⁶ and Maz Jobrani.¹⁷

- *The magician.* TED audiences like to see performers deconstruct their craft. In the case of comedians, deconstructing the craft kills the humor. In the case of magicians, deconstructing the craft is a violation of the Magician's Oath, which prevents the sharing of the secrets behind illusions with nonmagicians. Though often a personal oath, it is also a foundation of the code of ethics in most professional magicians' societies. As a consequence of this limitation and of the requirement to have an idea worth spreading, one tends to find less traditional magicians on the TED stage. Examples include Arthur Benjamin ("Mathemagic"¹⁸), Keith Barry ("Brain Magic"¹⁹), and Marco Tempest ("Augmented Reality, Techno-Magic"²⁰). Though not technically a magician, I put fraud debunker James Randi²¹ in this category as well.
- *The writer.* The writer persona includes creators of fiction and poetry. Here is where you will find Elizabeth Gilbert,²² Chimamanda Adichie,²³ and Isabel Allende²⁴ talking not only about their craft but also about their personal journeys as writers. My favorite in this category is Karen Thompson Walker,²⁵ who weaves a historical narrative with a counterintuitive message about what fear can teach us.
- *The performing artist.* This group includes dancers, musicians, and singers, as well as actors and directors of stage and screen. Though there are many traditional performances that are pure entertainment, the best talks by these types of artists mix performance with insight. For example, conductor Benjamin Zander²⁶ illustrated how "the job of the C [note] is to make the B [note] sad" in Chopin's "Prelude in E Minor." Though you never need to know why music makes you feel the way you do, it is enlightening to discover at least one reason why.
- *The visual artist.* Visual artists using nearly every medium are well represented in popular TED Talks. Candy Chang²⁷

breathes new life into abandoned public spaces and structures. Erik Johansson²⁸ shares his incredible photography. You can also find the intersection of technology and art in many talks, including Beau Lotto's²⁹ optical illusions.

Category 3. Change Agents

Having covered technology and entertainment, you would expect the next group of TED personas to fall into the design category. However, design is more of a philosophy adopted by speakers of all kinds and transcends rigid classification. If technologists educate and entertainers entertain, then we need a third group to hold personas whose principal mission is to inspire. I call this largest of the three groups "change agents." If you did not find yourself in one of the prior categories, then you should adopt one of the following personas to share your idea worth spreading:

- *The activist.* Nearly every TED speaker is an activist in some way. So think of this role as someone vigorously engaged in driving social, political, or environmental change often by drawing attention to an immediate injustice. Three excellent speakers who conform to this persona include Bunker Roy, Jamie Oliver,³⁰ and Temple Grandin.³¹
- *The authority.* The authority persona is the most general. This category refers to speakers who share the epiphanies they experienced in their interesting, sometimes enviable, day jobs. The most popular talks in this category include Rory Sutherland's "Life Lessons from an Ad Man,"³² Cameron Russell's "Looks Aren't Everything. Believe Me, I'm a Model,"³³ and Peter van Uhm's "Why I Chose a Gun."³⁴ Mr. Sutherland, a senior executive at a marketing firm, shares a counterintuitive idea about using psychological advertising techniques for good rather than for evil. Ms. Russell and Mr. van Uhm take similar approaches in challenging conventional wisdom about

what it is like to be a fashion model and military commander, respectively.

- *The business guru.* Business gurus are the successful nonfiction authors and business authorities who curate and popularize esoteric social science to help others become more successful at work. Though there are exceptions such as Sheryl Sandberg,³⁵ this is a disproportionately male-dominated category that includes the likes of Simon Sinek,³⁶ Dan Pink,³⁷ and Seth Godin.³⁸
- *The explorer.* Where authorities reveal epiphanies experienced in their day jobs, explorers share insights from personal experience. In some instances, they share stories about near-death experiences such as plane crashes (Ric Elias³⁹) or brutal muggings (Ed Gavagan⁴⁰). But it is just as effective to describe a positive practice that many dream of but never do; Matt Cutts's⁴¹ "Try Something New for 30 Days" is a nice example of this. Ordinary-man Joe Smith⁴² proved that even the mundane can be transformed into an idea worth spreading with his "How to Use a Paper Towel."
- *The personal guru.* Personal gurus are to the self-help section of the bookstore what business gurus are to the professional motivation section. And just as in the self-help section, you will find subsections devoted to love and sexuality, happiness, and religion. There are time-tested megastars here, including Tony Robbins,⁴³ Malcolm Gladwell,⁴⁴ and Mary Roach.⁴⁵ However, there are also plenty of newly minted phenoms such as introvert champion Susan Cain⁴⁶ and personal health guide Ron Gutman.⁴⁷ Most personal gurus, like their business counterparts, are writers.
- *The social entrepreneur.* There is a rather thin line between social entrepreneurs and activists, although in truth many speakers straddle both categories. The principal difference is

that social entrepreneurs apply business management principles to social change. This category includes free online education advocate Salman Khan,⁴⁸ video game designer Jane McGonigal,⁴⁹ and clean-water innovator Michael Pritchard.⁵⁰

TIP 3: Frame your idea worth spreading as an action-outcome response to a question worth asking.

Excluding TED Talks whose sole purpose is to entertain, the main mission of most TED Talks is to call listeners to action in such a way that makes the world a better place. Many of the most satisfying talks recommend that listeners take tiny actions that can lead to large personal and societal benefits. Since people are naturally stuck in their ways, the tiny actions suggested need to be fast, cheap, and easy. One of my favorite examples is Joe Smith, who started his talk at TEDxConcordiaUPortald in 2012 with the following:

If we [Americans] could reduce the usage of paper towels, one paper towel per person per day, 571,230,000 pounds of paper [would] not [be] used.

While there is no single best way to phrase your idea worth spreading during your talk, there is an excellent way to think about it during the planning stages. To impose good discipline, the format I recommend is “To (action) so that (outcome).” Let’s look at the questions that trigger ideas worth spreading and how individual speakers answered them, starting with the technologists:

- *The inventor.* MIT Media Labs wizard Pranav Mistry asked himself, “How do I accelerate the development and adoption of technology that will close the digital divide and restore our connection to the physical world?” He answered with this idea worth spreading: “To promote the development of digital

gadgets that people can interact with using natural gestures so that we do not end up as machines sitting in front of other machines.”

- *The life scientist.* Neuroscientist Jill Bolte Taylor asked herself, “How can I combine my personal experience and my scientific knowledge to give people a way to treat each other more compassionately?” She answered with the idea worth spreading, “To choose to live in the collective consciousness of your brain’s right hemisphere (rather than the self-centric left hemisphere) so that we can have a more peaceful world.”
- *The natural scientist.* Mycologist Paul Stamets⁵¹ asked himself, “How can I alert people to an unobserved but growing threat to the survival of all living organisms?” He answered with the idea worth spreading, “To preserve the biodiversity of mushrooms in old-growth forests so that we prevent the mass extinction of life on earth.”
- *The social scientist.* Sir Ken Robinson asked, “What small change can we make to our education system that will unleash the hidden potential of our collective but repressed creativity?” He answered with the idea worth spreading, “To educate the whole being of children, their right and left brain, so that they can build a brighter future.”

Now, let’s turn our attention to the entertainers:

- *The comedian.* Improv Everywhere founder Charlie Todd asked himself, “How can I get adults to recapture the uninhibited bliss of their childhoods?” He answered with the idea worth spreading, “To accept that there is no right or wrong way to play so that we can have more joy.”
- *The magician.* Mathemagician Arthur Benjamin asked himself, “How do I convince people that normal minds can perform

impossible tasks?” He answered with the idea worth spreading, “To use clever shortcuts so that complex problems become easy.” If you listen to his talk, it is hard to catch this since he never states it explicitly. However, he illustrates it when he reveals that the trick to squaring large numbers is to break them down into the sum of three simpler calculations. For example, what is 68 squared? You could calculate it as 68 times 68, which is mind blowing for most people. Or you could sum 60 times 60 (3,600) plus 8 times 8 (64) plus 60 times 8 times 2 (960). Either way, the answer is 4,624. Maybe that is not easy, but it is at least easier.

- *The writer.* Fiction writer Chimamanda Adichie asked herself, “How do I prevent people from making the mistakes I made about my own identity and about my perception of the identities of others?” She answered with the idea worth spreading, “To reject stereotypes as incomplete stories so that we embrace the true diversity of individuals and groups.”
- *The performing artist.* Conductor Benjamin Zander asked himself, “How can I ignite people’s passion for an underappreciated form of art?” He answered with the idea worth spreading, “To embrace classical music so that you can experience deep emotion.”
- *The visual artist.* Urban artist Candy Chang asked herself, “How do I help people experience emotional catharsis?” She answered with the idea worth spreading, “To repurpose abandoned public spaces as anonymous message boards so that people can express their deepest secrets and dreams.”

Finally, consider the questions and answers of the change agents:

- *The activist.* Indian activist Bunker Roy asked himself, “How can I empower the disenfranchised to empower themselves?” He answered with the idea worth spreading, “To empower

rural women with knowledge so that they can improve the standard of living in their communities.”

- *The authority.* Advertising executive Rory Sutherland asked himself, “How can I challenge people’s conventional wisdom about my profession?” He answered with the idea worth spreading, “To encourage people to embrace intangible value so that we increase our perceived wealth and conserve limited resources.”
- *The business guru.* Author and thinker Simon Sinek asked himself, “What is the fastest way to improve the success of individuals and corporations?” He answered with the idea worth spreading, “To encourage leaders to start with why so that they can inspire others.”
- *The explorer.* Though he is a search algorithm engineer at Google, the persona Matt Cutts adopted for his TED Talk had nothing to do with his day job. He was just an ordinary person trying to improve his life. He asked himself, “What one tip can I share from my self-improvement journey that inspires and teaches others how to improve their lives?” He answered with the idea worth spreading, “To stick to a new habit (or remove a bad one) for 30 days so that you can achieve lasting positive change.”
- *The personal guru.* Self-help author Susan Cain asked herself, “How can I help people accept themselves and others for who they are?” She answered with the idea worth spreading, “To show introverts that they contribute equal value to the world as extroverts, though often in different ways, so that introverts do not feel the need to change what gives them creativity and energy.”
- *The social entrepreneur.* Former hedge fund analyst turned online educator Salman Khan asked himself, “How do I help

my cousins living 1,500 miles away do better in school?” From that humble beginning came a gigantic idea worth spreading: “To build an online, global classroom so that everyone can increase their math and science aptitude.”

Selecting a topic requires an act of deep introspection beginning with the end in mind. There is a good chance that one of the questions I’ve listed will trigger a great topic for your speech. If that does not work, you can further generalize by asking questions of self-discovery such as the following: “What is the greatest lesson I ever learned?” “What is the greatest joy I ever experienced?” “The greatest misery?” “What is my life’s mission, and how can I enlist others to join my crusade?”

If all else fails, then you can ask, “What is the most amazing story I can tell?” Though stories are the centerpiece of most TED Talks, they are the proof for the point that you want to make. Hence, if you begin your topic discovery with a story, you need to focus on making sure that the moral is clear.

TIP 4: Sow a single seed of inspiration.

After each audience member leaves the auditorium or surfs on to the next website, you should have planted one idea that either awakens the person’s consciousness to a new way of thinking or persuades him or her to take action. This will achieve your objective to sow a single seed of inspiration.

Most of the time, the best way to approach topic selection is to pick a single unifying message that you want to deliver and then scour your brain for amazing experiences that add emotional depth to the logical argument of your message. If you get stuck, do it the other way around. No one will ever know. What is key here, and I cannot stress this enough, is to have a crystal-clear understanding of your central idea before you do anything else. One of the biggest

mistakes speakers make is trying to pack a lifetime of learning in a single talk. A laser focus on a single concept gives you the clarity to edit your material. If you have a great concept or story that does not directly support your message, then you have to omit it, no matter how much you want to use it.

Not infrequently, speakers deliver an artfully crafted, highly focused talk until they reach their conclusion. In what in their minds is a great act of compassion, they bolt on one or more additional pieces of advice worth spreading. This often comes in the form of a story with a different moral than the one central to their talk. Unfortunately, this jumble of ideas severely limits the overall impact of the speech.

There are, of course, many TED Talks that never get posted on TED.com. Often, the reason is that speakers lacked focus throughout the course of their speech and failed to sow a single seed of inspiration.

TIP 5: Connect with people's deep-rooted needs for belonging, self-interest, self-actualization, or hope for the future.

Of the 10 most viewed TED Talks, 7 focused on inspiring people to change themselves. There is no novelty in the concepts they address; there is nothing new under the sun. (Case in point—that expression is a 2,000-year-old biblical quote from Ecclesiastes.) Those seven talks focused on concepts inside the human mind, including mental illness, creativity, leadership, happiness, motivation, success, and self-worth.

The other three most viewed TED Talks cast a wider net by catalyzing interpersonal and societal change. They called us to action or altered our perspective on public health, public education, and diversity. The speakers who gave these talks were not the first to explore those subjects, and they will not be the last. They touched

us by giving their perspective on why these ideas matter and how you can make a difference.

As you think about making emotional connections that inspire your audience, keep in mind that people generally have four fundamental needs that emerge after meeting our basic needs for physiological health and physical security.

The first of the four is the need for love and belonging. In mid-2011, Gerda Grimshaw posted the question “What makes you happy?” on the TED discussion group on LinkedIn. Gerda is founder of Call Mom, a free referral service that connects single mothers and their children with resources and education to help them become self-sufficient and to thrive. Of the more than 100 responses generated, 92 of them were people genuinely sharing the source of their happiness. Though my approach was not unimpeachably scientific, I classified and categorized the responses to understand the secret behind contentment. As you can see from the following, love and belonging, expressed via social interaction, dominates the list:

- Social interaction with family, friends, and, yes, pets (30.4 percent)
- Experiencing nature (12.0 percent)
- Charity and volunteering (10.9 percent)
- Task completion (9.8 percent)
- Inspiring others though coaching, teaching, or writing (7.6 percent)
- Introspection and learning (7.6 percent)
- Mindfulness or “being in the moment” (6.5 percent)
- Good health—particularly among people with recent or chronic illness (5.4 percent)
- Physical pleasure and exercise (5.4 percent)

- Self-expression (2.2 percent)
- Financial well-being (2.2 percent)

The second of the fundamental deep-rooted needs is desire and self-interest. In the above list, physical pleasure, exercise, and financial well-being all fall into this group. Truth be told, the frequency of these items in the general population is probably a bit higher, but it is socially taboo to comment on these desires in LinkedIn's mostly squeaky clean and not anonymous discussion groups. Lest you think such subjects are not the stuff of TED Talks, think again. Mary Roach shared "10 Things You Did Not Know About Orgasm" in her TED2009 presentation, and Helen Fisher⁵² revealed "Why We Love + Cheat" in her TED2006 performance. There are plenty of talks on money too, albeit with a slant toward inspiring people to overcome their inhibitions and pursue their entrepreneurial dreams.

Accelerating personal development is the third fundamental need that you can access to connect with your audience. We all want to learn and to grow. We are curious about ourselves, and we work to challenge and ultimately overcome our limitations. We are equally curious about the world around us. By way of example, if you have a recipe for setting and achieving goals, then you have the makings of a great TED Talk. The mechanics of this kind of topic are often used; what is novel is the story of how you have failed, learned, and overcome adversity.

It is no accident that "hope and change" was the centerpiece of Barack Obama's winning 2008 presidential campaign. It is the centerpiece of every mass movement, be it social, political, or religious. And it is the fourth of the fundamental needs that we have as human beings. To captivate your listeners, help them make an enemy of the status quo and see the positive promise of tomorrow that is just out of reach and worth the effort. At some point in our lives, we all wake up and stand before the insatiable chasm of existential

meaninglessness. People need to make a difference. Give them the means and the will to make their dent in the universe.

TIP 6: Speak about a topic you are passionate about.

From this book you will absorb a Swiss Army knife's worth of techniques and tricks for delivering a powerful speech. As with any sharp object, please exercise caution. The single greatest danger in public speaking is losing authenticity by overengineering your talk. However, amazing things happen when you confine your speaking to a topic that you are passionate about. Your nerves subside. You automatically build persuasive arguments. Stories roll off your tongue. And your delivery becomes an afterthought. TED star Simon Sinek confirmed as much when I asked him how he delivered his magical talk:

When people ask me how I learned to speak I tell them, truthfully, that I cheat! I only talk about things I care about and about things I understand. I can't manufacture passion. People who have kids can talk for hours about their kids. They tell story after story after story with such excitement. I do the same. The ideas I share are like children—I really, really care about them and I am excited to share stories about them to anyone who will listen.

Many people who write and speak about speaking advise you to figure out what the audience wants and then adapt your message to suit people's needs. This well-intentioned advice has a downside. While it is important to tailor content to an audience's needs, your alterations should be confined to cosmetic changes. For example, you might swap one vignette for another that your audience can more directly relate to. Or you might change the amount of background information you provide given your audience's prior knowledge. I believe it is far better to seek out audiences who want and need your

ideas rather than bending like a reed in the wind. Fortunately TED audiences are eager to experience any idea worth spreading that educates, entertains, and inspires them.

TIP 7: Remember that you speak in service of your audience.

Having organized several TEDx events and been an advisor to organizers of many others, I am frequently approached by hopeful as well as established professional speakers for advice on how to get accepted to give a talk. Since I suspect most of you are more interested in improving your public speaking ability than in actually being on the TED stage, I will save a detailed overview of that topic for Part IV of this book. However, I would like to share with you the single most important piece of advice I share with them.

I respond to their question of how to get accepted for a talk with the question, “Why do you want to give a talk?” In most instances the response is, “Because this is a golden opportunity to build my brand,” or “Because I have dreamed of giving a TED Talk ever since I saw my first TED video.” You have to at least give them credit for their honesty.

The problem with these answers is that they are speaker centric rather than audience centric. TED organizers can smell this from a mile away, and it is a major turnoff. The right answer is, “Because I have an insatiable need to share an idea worth spreading even if it touches the heart and mind of just one person in the audience.” With that answer, you have succeeded even if your video has quality problems and never makes it online.

I’ll leave you with the advice that Simon Sinek gave me:

Most importantly, I always show up to give. I very often say it out loud to myself before I take the stage, “You’re here to share your ideas today.” Whenever I speak, I don’t show up wanting anything from anyone—e.g., more business, approval, sell books, more

Twitter followers, or Facebook likes. I always show up to share what I know. If they like it then they will applaud, which is the best way for me gauge if what I gave was important to them.

Once you identify your idea worth spreading, you need to structure it in a way that makes it easy for your audience to absorb. The next chapter shows you how to organize your talk so that it touches your audience intellectually and emotionally.

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