

Secrets From a TED2013 Speaker: Preparing for the "Talk of One's Life"

February 22, 2013

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A few days from now, I'll be delivering a talk on the main TED stage. Right alongside Bono, the world-famous rockstar.

TED 2013

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All times are:

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 26, 2013

Tuesday, February 26, 2013, 11:00am-12:45pm PST

Session 1: Progress Enigma



Ms. Globalist
Thinker, visionary



Bono
Musician, activist



Nilofer Merchant
Author

TED is well known, of course, as the global phenomena with over 5,000 TEDx events over the last three years. TED – the larger non-profit -- hosts two conferences themselves every year, one that is called TEDGlobal (in Scotland) and one that is simply known as TED, which stands for Technology, Entertainment, and Design. People vie to speak at TED in the same way actors vie to be at the Oscars.

Giving a TED Talk is often characterized as “giving the talk of your life.” But this one is even more significant for me: It’s my chance to redeem myself. I spoke in 2012 at TEDGlobal, but I wasn’t thrilled with my performance. I did alright, but I didn’t deliver a seriously kick-ass talk, and I [hope to apply what I’ve learned](#).



When I was asked to speak again, I remember thinking, “This isn’t really happening,” because it seemed surreal. And now that it’s about to happen ... I’ve been preparing differently. And as it is still fresh in my mind, let me share with you what I’m doing – and what you can do to prepare to deliver the “talk of your life.”

To prepare:

Find your one idea. TED and TED-like venues ask you to distill your life's work or experience into a 3, 6, 9, 12, or 18-minute talk in a way no one else has ever done. Simple, right? No, not really. Finding your idea is about [finding a point of view](#) that expresses your insight in a distinct way. In my case, I have three minutes, which means finding the most powerful expression of the idea. Because I like to write, I blogged it and made the headline the main idea: [Sitting is the Smoking of Our Generation](#). You could discover your one idea by talking with close friends or colleagues. My [TEDGlobal talk was about openness](#), but lacked a distinct point of view given the context of the venue.

Make the ideas transferable. Sometimes people tell a huge long story with one punch line after several minutes. It's hard to follow the idea, even when you're listening well. And sometimes TED gets dinged for packaging up easily digestible ideas, but the bottom line is this: Until you make an idea easily conveyable and sharable through compelling language, it doesn't make sense and it doesn't get spread. To make an idea transferable is not to dumb down the idea, but to clarify the idea. Speaker [Cindy Gallop](#), who gave a four-minute talk on the TED stage several years ago, advised me to have no more than one supporting idea for each minute you're speaking, which is dead on. Think one tweetable idea in every minute.

Don't Impress, but Share. If you ever go on stage to impress, you'll fail. This was the mistake I made at TEDGlobal. I wanted to be seen as smart and perfect, and so that made me stiff and self-conscious. But what makes someone want to listen to any speaker is about connection – and you get that through sharing your passion, and resonating with people (not talking at them). The audience can feel it when you are interested in impressing them, and they will resent it. Share what you know because it's valuable and make it applicable beyond you. Tell the story of why you care as your context but focus attention on the idea you came to share, and the consequence of that idea to other people, and any broader context.

Story Then Script. Many people start with slides and powerpoint to map out their talk. What is better is if you know the high-level story arc of the talk, what stories should follow what other stories, and so on. I've turned to [Nancy Duarte's](#), a 2-time best selling author on presentations, advice for some of this. But the key no one really tells you is this: only *after* you've conceptualized everything, write the script or PPT. Then, to polish, get advice. Scripting lets you see where you need a transition of an idea, or whether you are putting enough emphasis on any particular point. But advice lets you tune messages with an outsiders ear. I was fortunate to have Sherry Turkle, the bestselling author of *Alone Together*, and [TED2012 speaker](#) as an adviser. Somewhere between drafts two and three, I had diluted a key (big) point and she luckily caught it. The point of the script is time out every word to see how long it takes to deliver it also.

Practice. Practice. Practice. Practice when you feel like it. And, even when you don't feel like it. At least two weeks out from a big talk, start to deliver the talk with notes and ultimately without them. Memorize where possible. I say it to myself 15 minutes every day. And once right before bed. Then I get a full night of restful sleep so that some part of my brain commits it to memory. At one week out, I've moved to keywords on Post-it notes. By five days out, I am no longer looking at any notes. I usually wake up the full week before a talk with it playing in my mind. You want it in there, even though it won't actually be the talk that'll come out that day. There is the talk you plan on giving and the talk that you give. If you are great at performance and memorization, it's quite possible for those

to be one and the same. But the more important thing to happen is for you to know what you came to say and know it well.

But the most difficult part of preparing for “the talk of your life” is the buildup. And herein lies the true experience of getting ready. It’s managing your mental state of preparing with confidence. This is an incredibly high stakes setting.

I don’t know how exactly I got to this spot. I’m both excited and terrified at the same time. And, now as I prepare to do it, I’m frankly in awe of those that have gone before me. I wonder how they managed to be so present and passionate, so informed, and yet humble.

And yes, I’m scared. Really, really scared. I’ve botched other talks, or done what I could call “B” performances at times when I know I had an “A” in me. This could be another one of those times where I hold back or try and be perfect, or *this* could be the time I fully show up, more like I did at [TEDxHouston](#) recently. I’m going to do the best I know how to do. And, then my real goal is keep myself present in that moment – if I’m there in the room sharing, the best I can in *that* moment – it’ll work out.

(If it goes well, how about I come back and write a follow-on post about the secrets of *delivering* the talk of your life?)