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Craft your story, and develop your voice.

John Bates' mission is to bring out what is awesome inside you, so it can live in the world and make a real difference. He designs his programs using principles derived from neurobiology so your communication is as mighty as your ideas.

How to Create a Great Speech Without Suffering

Key Takeaways

First: "Living with" your talk is one of the most important things you can do to ensure your success on the TED, or any, stage.

Second: Your initial take on the talk will probably be too long and could probably be rearranged and restructured to make it more powerful. Good! Restructure it and let it shorten itself through out-loud practice for a while.

Third: Focus extra time on the opening and closing. This is what will make you most memorable.

Pro-tip: When you walk off that stage you will feel one of only two ways. There is no middle ground when the stakes are so high. Either you will walk off stage with a tremendous, stinging, self-inflicted disappointment. Or, you will walk off stage elated.



This guide will save you from a lot of heartache if you follow it. These are some of the most important things I have discovered while working with so many people on so many talks for TED, TEDx and otherwise.

Important overarching message: Most of my life, when I was invited to speak, let's say, 3 months early, I would ponder, and think about, and resist, and procrastinate, for at least 2½ of those 3 months. It's an awful experience. You may know what I'm talking about.

Once I discovered TED and the artistry of the format, I started doing things differently. When I know I have 3 months to prepare, I get my talk created and finalized within the first week or two. That means I have lots of time to "live with" my presentation. I practice it and practice it and practice it. Along the way I fix minor issues, find ways to iterate it and make it better, and by the time I walk out on stage I've been living with, exploring, trying out on my friends and churning subconsciously on the actual talk I'm going to give. That sure beats agonizing about my unwritten talk for 2½ months!

I cannot overemphasize the benefit of "living with" your talk for as long as you possibly can before you get up onstage and deliver it! Wow. Note: I do NOT mean resisting and avoiding and procrastinating. I mean living with what is essentially final version for 2½ months, or as long as you can possibly give yourself with it. Please remember this when you get to the end of this loving note!

1. **Spend time really pondering your main message.** Think deeply about it. In a TED or TEDx talk you only have one message you can convey. There just isn't time for more. The best TED talks have a single and clear "Idea Worth Spreading" and they relentlessly serve that idea. What is your one idea worth spreading?
2. **Once you've got an idea about your idea it's time for a brain dump.** I think the best way to do this is using Post-It Notes. Write out your ideas by putting one, and only one idea, one story, or one point you want to make, on one Post-It Note. Do this near a big, blank wall and stick them up as fast as you write them. Once you run out of steam and have all your ideas, points and stories out, start to go through and pull the best ones to another part of the wall. I call this the Curation Phase. Prioritizing is one of the most intensive and difficult activities that your brain can perform, but this phase is one big key to a truly great talk or presentation.
3. **Once you have pulled out the most important Post-It Notes don't throw the leftovers away!** They're the starter culture for your next talk,, stash them. Now, turn to the ones you have curated and begin to look for the best order in which to share them.

Remember to create some excitement, start in the middle and keep things interesting. Although the flow should be logical, don't make it predictable.

4. **OK, now that you've curated the best things into your speech,** you've weeded out what isn't absolutely necessary to this talk, and you've put it all into an order that works to support your message, create an outline. Or, if you'd rather, write it out word for word. **WARNING:** If you write it out word for word please be careful to keep it in your conversational voice. Often

pieces that are written word for word can sound “book report-ish.” The last time that kind of language worked for a great speech was the Gettysburg Address. Stilted, book report language turns audiences off.

5. **Now, practice going through your speech!** Notice, I haven’t said time it, yet! Don’t worry about time, yet. Once you have the main idea of the speech rolling you can start to think more about time. Obviously, if it’s got to be 12 minutes and you’re at 45, you might want to go back to the Post-It Notes. But, better to trim it down later than to miss the gold by leaving something key out too early.
6. **Now you’re at a very crucial juncture.** You have a very good talk. It works. Everyone is really into it. That’s great. But, if you want to be really extraordinary, you will go back and dig even deeper, now that you’re here. Ask yourself, what am I avoiding? What am I afraid of sharing? What would you come up with if you went back and really dug in, looking for that next level of this talk? It’s worth doing. It’s where the gold lies. Go back. Dig EVEN deeper. Take this great talk to the next level and make it truly extraordinary.
7. **Now that you’ve got the real thing, start thinking about whether or not you need any slides.** If you can do this without slides that would be my suggestion. People want to be with you, not your slides. If you only need a few slides then you could potentially put black slides in between the few slides you need. And, if you need slides to really get this across, then revisit *Speak Like a Leader*, Unit 10 Section 1, *Bullets Are For the Enemy*, about using slides. Don’t make the audience the enemy. Choose great visuals that support your message, connect emotionally, and help you convey your message! I’ve also gotten the great advice to only have one idea per slide. It may mean you have a lot of slides, but they’ll be very clear, very direct, one idea per slide and it will be much better than the alternative: fewer *crowded* slides.
8. **When I do my talks word for word**, which I rarely, but sometimes do, I usually take the word for word to an outline, which I make more and more sparse as I get better at delivering it. At first, as I practiced the speech from the outline, I have the word for word version close by, in case I needed it. Quickly, I try to wean myself from the word for word version. I only take along a couple of the really perfect turns of phrase, from the word for word version to the outline. Said differently, I quickly get good at doing the speech pretty close to word for word, but from an outline so I don’t have to worry about actually memorizing the whole thing word for word. That makes it sound much more conversational. Besides, when people memorize things absolutely word for word, if anything goes wrong you have to have a backup way to get back into it. It’s hard to sing the alphabet song starting at J, if you know what I mean.
9. **Either way, practice so much it doesn’t seem like you practiced at all.** I’ve noticed that there is a place I get to when I *practice* a lot that makes it seem like I practiced a lot - I call this place the ‘practice gap’. Chris Anderson of TED is far more poetic. He calls it “The Valley of Awkwardness.” It takes lots and lots more practice to make it seem like I didn’t practice at all. And that will work for you, too. All the really great speakers make that commitment. I know firsthand from talking with, supporting and observing them.
10. **Now, go back over the PDFs you got in the course about openings and closings.** The opening is the most important part of the speech because if they stop listening nothing you say matters. The closing is your opportunity to send them out with the final, clear, single most

important thing you want them to remember about what you said ringing in their ears. I find most good speakers I know spend a disproportionately larger amount of time on the opening and the closing than the rest of the speech. Dial these and it will make a very big difference.

11. **Finally, remember why you're there, why you worked this hard, why you practiced so long, why you took this crazy risk in the first place: the audience.** You are doing this for them. (If you're not, they'll smell it a mile away, but I doubt you'd be here if that were the case.) Really great communicators keep their focus on the audience. In Unit 11, Section 1 you heard the advice I got from both Snoop Dogg and Candace. Don't be nervous, be at their service. It's the best advice I could leave with you. I know for a fact that Simon Sinek, who has given not just one, but two of the most popular TED talks of all time spends a good amount of time right before he goes onstage reminding himself: "I'm here to serve. I'm here to serve. I'm here to serve." I believe that if you're really there to serve, if you stay present and if you prepare with integrity it is impossible for you to fail.

In closing, here is the deal: I can tell you from both elated and painful experiences that when you walk off that stage you will feel one of two ways. There is no middle ground when the stakes are so high. Either you will walk off with the tremendous, stinging self-inflicted disappointment that I know all too well. "I could have done better. If only..." Or, you will know that you gave it everything you had. You prepared, did it how it's meant to be done, you went back and dug deeper once you thought you had dug as deep as you could, you practiced and practiced and practiced, and you can feel good about what you delivered there on stage.

I know from hard personal experience that the second way is the way you want to feel. Take this challenge on fully and you will experience a feeling that is rare and wonderful: doing something great with excellence.

Key Takeaways

- Start early so you have time to perfect and "live with" your presentation - Review, refine and repeat until it's second nature when it's time to deliver.
- Be clear on your 'One Idea Worth Spreading'.
- Use the sticky-note key-point braindump technique.
- Be responsible for what they hear.
- Make sure your order is logical, but not predictable.
- Write it out or use an outline. AND practice from an outline, but do not memorize word for word.
- Practice as often as you can.
- Practice Insightful Vulnerability™ Dig deep.
- To slide or not to slide, that is the question - do you need slides?
- Make sure you don't get stuck in the valley of awkwardness - practice even more.
- Open & Close like a champion, *because it matters*.
- Remember, it's not about you, it's about the audience.