Presentation and communication skills

Lecture 6 - Preparation process

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Office hours (Room 5C.30)
Monday 15:15 – 16:00
Wednesday 12:30 – 13:15

Literature:

- Gallo, C. (2014). Talk like TED: the 9 public-speaking secrets of the world's top minds. St. Martin's Press.
- Anderson, C. (2016). TED talks: The official TED guide to public speaking. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Visuals

- Photographs, illustrations, elegant typography, graphs, infographics, animation, video, audio, big data simulations—all can dial up both the explanatory power of a talk and its aesthetic appeal.

- Despite this, the first question to ask yourself is whether you actually need any of it.

- Slides move at least a little bit of attention away from the speaker and onto the screen. If the whole power of a talk is in the personal connection between speaker and audience, slides may actually get in the way of that.

- And for every speaker, the following is true: Having no slides at all is better than bad slides.

- However, the majority of talks do benefit from great slides, and for some talks, the visuals are the absolute difference between success and failure.

Great visuals

- So what are the key elements to strong visuals? They fall into three categories:

- **revelation** - the most obvious case for visuals is simply to show something that's hard to describe. Presenting the work of most artists and photographers of course depends on doing this. An explorer revealing a voyage or a scientist unveiling a discovery can also use visuals in this way.

- **explanatory power** - a picture is worth a thousand words. Often the best explanations happen when words and images work together. Your mind is an integrated system. Much of our world is imagined visually. If you want to really explain something new, often the simplest, most powerful way is to show and tell.

- But for that to work, there needs to be a compelling fit between what you tell and what you show. The key to avoiding this is to limit each slide to a single core idea. Similarly, it doesn't make sense to leave a slide onscreen once you've finished talking about it.

- Other speakers still seem to believe that you enhance the explanatory power of your slides by filling them with words, often the same words that they plan to utter. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Those classic PowerPoint slide decks with a headline followed by multiple bullet points of long phrases are the surest single way to lose an audience's attention altogether.

- When you think about it, it's fairly simple. The main purpose of visuals can't be to communicate words; your mouth is perfectly good at doing that. It's to share things your mouth can't do so well: photographs, video, animations, key data.

- **delight** - An often overlooked contribution of visuals is their ability to give a talk immense aesthetic appeal."

Some good tips

- Presentation software: there are three main presentation tools: PowerPoint, Keynote (for Mac), and Prezi. PowerPoint is ubiquitous, though I find Keynote easier to use, and with better typography and graphics. Prezi (in which TED was an early investor) offers an alternative mode in which, instead of a linear succession of slides, you move around a two-dimensional landscape, zooming in and out to focus on what matters to you.

- Most projectors and screens these days are the dimensions of a modern widescreen television: 16:9, as opposed to the 4:3 of old TVs. Yet presentation software opens up in 4:3 mode. You want to immediately change the settings to 16:9 (unless you're speaking at a venue where they might still have only 4:3 projectors).

- Don't use the software's built-in templates of bullets, letters, and dashes. Your presentation will look the same as everyone else's, and the templates end up being limiting.

- If you're showing a lot of photos, use black as the background—it will disappear and your photos will pop.

- Photo resolution: Use pictures with the highest resolution possible to avoid annoying pixelation of the images when projected on large screens. There is no such thing as too high a resolution, unless it slows the software down.

Fonts/typefaces

- It’s usually best to use one typeface per presentation. Some typefaces are better suited than others. We usually recommend medium-weight sans-serif fonts like Helvetica or Arial. But don’t use excessively thin fonts as they are hard to read, especially on a dark background. If in doubt, keep it simple.

- Use 24 points or larger in most cases. Use at most three sizes of your chosen typeface per presentation, and there should be a reason for each size. Large size is for titles/headlines; medium size is for your main ideas; small size is for supporting ideas.

- If you’re going to place type over a photo, make sure you place it where your audience can read it. If a photo is too busy to put type on directly, add a small black bar at the bottom and put the type on it.

- Color: Here the operative words are simple and contrast. Black on white, a dark color on white, and white or yellow on black all look good because they have great contrast and are easy to read. Use only one color of font per presentation unless you want to show emphasis or surprise. Never use a light-color type on a light-color background or dark-color type on a dark-color background—for example, light blue on yellow or red on black just won’t be easy to read.

- After you make your font and color choices, look at your presentation on your computer or—way better—on your TV or a projector, and stand back 6 to 12 feet. Can you read everything? Do the photos look clear without pixelation? If not, readjust.

What not to do

- Bullets belong in The Godfather. Avoid them at all costs.
- Dashes belong at the Olympics, not at the beginning of text.
- Resist underlining and italics—they're too hard to read. bold typefaces are OK.
- Drop shadows can occasionally be useful to improve legibility, especially for type on top of photos, but use the effect sparingly.
- Don't use multiple type effects in the same line. It just looks terrible.
- Use builds—add words and images to a slide through a series of clicks—to focus people's attention on one idea at a time. Give your audience enough time to absorb each step. Don't feed too much of the slide at a time or people will get overwhelmed.

Videos

- Videos can be amazing tools to demonstrate your work and ideas.

- However, you should rarely show clips longer than 30 seconds. And in an 18-minute talk, show no more than two to four clips unless your work absolutely depends on it.

- It’s best if video clips are of your work and you have rights to them (versus a clip from Star Wars); explain something that can’t be explained by still images; and have great production value (shot in high-definition, with good lighting and especially good sound).

- A badly produced video will have your audience thinking more about its poor quality than about its content. Make sure it’s organic and authentic, not produced by your PR department or with bombastic canned music.

- Transitions: This is the dreaded quicksand of many a presenter. Rule of thumb: Avoid nearly all of them.

What can go wrong..

- There are many ways to prepare for and deliver a talk, and it's important to find the one that's right for you. Because when it comes to the exact moment, even if you've prepared something that is stunning, there is a long list of things that can go wrong, among them:

- Your tone of voice puts your audience to sleep. You sound like you're reciting. You run out of time before you've completed half of what you wanted to say. You get flustered trying to remember how your slides fit with the words you prepared. Your videos fail to start, and your slide clicker doesn't work properly.

- You fail to make eye contact with a single member of the audience. You feel uncomfortable on stage, not knowing whether you should walk around a little or stay rooted to one spot. So instead you compromise and shuffle awkwardly from leg to leg. The audience fails to laugh when they were supposed to.

- The audience laughs when they most definitely were not supposed to. The standing ovation you dreamed of is replaced by a smattering of polite applause. And—the one thing people dread most—you forget what you were going to say next, your mind goes blank, and you freeze.

- Happily, with diligent preparation, the risk of any of these happening can be truly minimized. But as the story above illustrates, it has to be the right type of preparation. And that begins with knowing how you plan to deliver your talk.

Scripting - To Memorize or Not to Memorize?

- One of the first key decisions you need to make—and ideally you'll make it early on in your talk preparation—is whether you will:
    - A. write out the talk in full as a complete script (to be read, memorized, or a combination of the two), or
    - B. have a clearly worked-out structure and speak in the moment to each of your points.
- There are powerful arguments in favor of each strategy.

Scripted talks

- The huge advantage of going the scripted route is that you can make the best possible use of your available time. It can be incredibly hard to condense all you want to say into 10, 15, or 18 minutes.

- If there are tricky explanations involved, or important steps in your persuasion process, it may be essential for you to get every word down and tweak every sentence and paragraph to perfection.

- Scripting also has the advantage that drafts of the talk can be shared ahead of time. That allows you to get feedback on which elements might be cut and which might need further explanation.

- But the big drawback of a script is that, unless you deliver it in the right way, the talk may not feel fresh. Being read to and being spoken to are two very different experiences. In general (and there are exceptions), audiences respond far more powerfully to the latter. When the words are read, they may feel impersonal and distanced.

- So if you go the script route, you have three main strategies open to you:

    - Know the talk so well that it doesn't for a moment sound scripted.

    - Refer to the script (either from a lectern—preferably not one that blocks out your whole body—or possibly from a screen or confidence monitor), but compensate by looking up during each sentence to make eye contact with the audience.

    - Condense the script to bullet points and plan to express each point in your own language in the moment.

- Harvard professor Dan Gilbert advises his students to speak their talks into a recorder first, then transcribe them, and use that as the initial draft of their talk. Why? "Because when people write, they tend to use words, phrases, sentence structures, and cadences that no one uses in natural speech. So when you start with written text and then try to adapt it for performance, you are basically trying to turn one form of communication into another, and odds are that your alchemy will fail.

Unscripted talks

- In the moment of delivery, you are not trying to recall a specific prewritten sentence. Instead you are thinking about the subject matter and looking for the best words to convey the point at hand. At most, you have a set of notes to guide you through the main elements of the talk.

- There's a lot to be said for going unscripted. It can sound fresh, alive, real, like you are thinking out loud. If this is your most comfortable speaking style, and if you are covering material that is very familiar to you, this may be your best choice.

- But it is important to distinguish unscripted from unprepared. You need a strategy to avoid the obvious pitfalls of such an approach:

    - That suddenly you can't, in the moment, find the words to explain a key concept.

    - That you leave out something crucial.

    - That you overrun your time slot.

- The old-fashioned method of a set of punchy notes handwritten on cards is still a decent way to keep yourself on track. Use the words that will trigger a key sentence or a phrase that launches the next step in your talk.

- The majority of TED speakers do in fact script their whole talk and memorize it, and they do their best to avoid letting it sound memorized. If you have time to do that, it probably gives you your best shot at encapsulating all you want to say and avoiding the usual traps of a memorized talk. But if you don't have the time to truly memorize until the talk is second nature, or if you already know that's just not how you give a great talk, please don't go this route.

Run-troughs

- Whichever mode of speaking you decide on, there's a very simple, very obvious tool you can use to improve your talk, but it's one that most speakers rarely undertake: Rehearse. Repeatedly.

- Musicians rehearse before playing. Actors rehearse before opening the theater doors to the paying public. For public talks, the stakes may well be as high or higher than any concert or play, yet many speakers seem to think they can just walk on the stage and get it right the first time.

- Thus it is that, time and again, hundreds of people in the audience have to suffer countless minutes of needless pain simply because one person didn't prepare adequately.

- Some things to ask your audience during or after these rehearsals:

    - Did I get your attention from the get-go? Was I making eye contact? Did the talk succeed in building a new idea for you? Was each step of the journey satisfying? Were there enough examples to make everything clear? How was my tone of voice? Did it sound conversational (usually good) or as if I was preaching (usually bad)?

    - Was there enough variety of tone and pacing? Did I sound as if I was reciting the talk? Were the attempts at humor natural or a little awkward? Was there enough humor? How were the visuals? Did they help or get in the way?

    - Did you notice any annoying traits? Was I clicking my tongue? Swallowing too often? Shifting from side to side? Repeatedly using a phrase like "you know" or (worse) "like"? Were my body gestures natural?

    - Did I finish on time? Were there moments you got a little bored? Was there something I could cut?

Opening and closing

- Whether or not you memorize your talk, it's important to pay attention to how you begin and how you end it. At the beginning of your talk, you have about a minute to intrigue people with what you'll be saying. And the way you end will strongly influence how your talk is remembered.

- However you deliver the rest of the talk, I strongly encourage you to script and memorize the opening minute and the closing lines. It helps with nerves, with confidence, and with impact.

- You want an opening that grabs people from the first moment. A surprising statement. An intriguing question. A short story. An incredible image.

- Remember that every piece of content in our modern era is part of an attention war. It's fighting against thousands of other claims on people's time and energy. This is true even when you're standing on a stage in front of a seated audience. They have deadly distracters in their pockets called smartphones, which they can use to summon to their eyes a thousand outside alternatives. Once emails and texts make their claim, your talk may be doomed.

Four ways to start strong

- Deliver a dose of drama - That doesn’t mean you have to cram something dramatic into the opening sentence; you definitely have a few moments of audience attention. But by the end of the first paragraph, something needs to land.

- Ignite curiosity - Igniting curiosity is the single most versatile tool at your disposal for ensuring audience engagement. If a talk’s goal is to build an idea in listeners’ minds, then curiosity is the fuel that powers listeners’ active participation.

- Show a compelling slide, video, or object - If you have the right material, this is clearly a great way to start a talk. Instead of saying, “Today I plan to talk to you about my work, but first I need to give you some background . . . ,” you can just start by saying: “Let me show you something.”

- Tease, but don’t give it away - instead of giving it all away up front, imagine what kind of language will seduce the audience into wanting to come along for the ride. Different audience, different language. If you decide to tease a little, please note that it’s still very important to indicate where you’re going and why. You don’t have to show the shark, but we do need to know it’s coming. Every talk needs mapping—a sense of where you’re going, where you are, and where you’ve been. If your listeners don’t know where they are in the structure of the talk, they will quickly get lost.

How not to end

- If you've held people's attention through the talk, don't ruin it with a flat ending. As Danny Kahneman explained so powerfully in both his book Thinking, Fast and Slow and in his TED Talk, how people remember an event may be very different from how they experienced it, and when it comes to remembering, your final experience is really important. In short, if the ending isn't memorable, the talk itself may not be. Here's how not to end:

- "Well, that's my time gone, so I'll wrap up there." (You mean, you had a lot more to say but can't tell us because of bad planning?)

- "Finally, I just want to thank my awesome team, who are pictured here: David, Joanna, Gavin, Samantha, Lee, Abdul, and Hezekiah. Also, my university, and my sponsors." (Lovely, but do you care about them more than your idea, and more than us, your audience?!)

- "So, given the importance of this issue, I hope we can start a new conversation about it together." (A conversation?! Isn't that a little lame? What should be the outcome of that conversation?)

- "The future is full of challenges and opportunities. Everyone here has it in their heart to make a difference. Let's dream together. Let's be the change we want to see in the world." (Beautiful sentiment, but the clichés really don't help anyone.)

- "I'll close with this video which summarizes my points." (No! Never end with a video. End with you!)

- "So that concludes my argument, now are there any questions?" (Or, how to preempt your own applause.)

- "I'm sorry I haven't had time to discuss some of the major issues here, but hopefully this has at least given you a flavor of the topic." (Don't apologize! Plan more carefully! Your job was to give the best talk you could in the time available.)

- "In closing, I should just point out that my organization could probably solve this problem if we were adequately funded. You have it in your power to change the world with us." (Ah, so this was a fundraising pitch all along?)

- "Thanks for being such an amazing audience. I have loved every moment, standing here, talking to you. I'll carry this experience with me for a long, long time. You've been so patient, and I know that you'll take what you've heard today and do something wonderful with it." ("Thank you" would have been just fine.).

Seven ways to end with power

- Camera pull-back - You've spent the talk explaining a particular piece of work. At the end, why not show us the bigger picture, a broader set of possibilities implied by your work?

- Call to action - If you've given your audience a powerful idea, why not end by nudging them to act on it?

- Personal commitment - It's one thing to call on the audience to act, but sometimes speakers score by making a giant commitment of their own.

- Values and vision - Can you turn what you've discussed into an inspiring or hopeful vision of what might be?

- Satisfying encapsulation - Sometimes speakers find a way to neatly reframe the case they've been making.

- Narrative symmetry - A talk built carefully on a throughline can deliver a pleasing conclusion by linking back to its opening.

- Lyrical inspiration - Sometimes, if the talk has opened people up, it's possible to end with poetic language that taps deep into matters of the heart.

Cool stuff to watch

- Jer Thorp - Make data more human: https://www.ted.com/talks/jer_thorp_make_data_more_human

- Simon Sinek - How great leaders inspire action: https://www.ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_how_great_leaders_inspire_action

- Rives - The Museum of Four in the Morning: https://www.ted.com/talks/rives_the_museum_of_four_in_the_morning

Questions?

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