

TED TALKS

**The Official TED Guide
to Public Speaking**

CHRIS ANDERSON

Head of TED

TED TALKS

The Official TED Guide
to Public Speaking

CHRIS ANDERSON

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt

BOSTON NEW YORK

2016

CONTENTS

[Title Page](#)

[Contents](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[The New Age of Fire](#)

Foundation

[Presentation Literacy](#)

[Idea Building](#)

[Common Traps](#)

[The Throughline](#)

Talk Tools

[Connection](#)

[Narration](#)

[Explanation](#)

[Persuasion](#)

[Revelation](#)

Preparation Process

[Visuals](#)

[Scripting](#)

[Run-Throughs](#)

[Open and Close](#)

On Stage

[Wardrobe](#)

[Mental Prep](#)

[Setup](#)

[Voice and Presence](#)

[Format Innovation](#)

Reflection

[Talk Renaissance](#)

[Why This Matters](#)

[Your Turn](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Talks Referenced within the Book](#)

[Index](#)

[TED on the Web](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Footnotes](#)

Copyright © 2016 by Chris Anderson

All rights reserved

For information about permission to reproduce selections from this book, write to trade.permissions@hmhco.com or to Permissions, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 3 Park Avenue, 19th Floor, New York, New York 10016.

www.hmhco.com

The Library of Congress has cataloged the print edition as follows:

Names: Anderson, Chris, date.

Title: TED talks : the official TED guide to public speaking / Chris Anderson.

Description: Boston : Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016. | Includes index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015048798 | ISBN 9780544634497 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780544809710 (international edition pbk.)

Subjects: LCSH: Public speaking—Handbooks, manuals, etc.

Classification: LCC PN4129.15 .A54 2016 | DDC 808.5/1—dc23

LC record available at <http://lcn.loc.gov/2015048798>

Cover design by Mike Femia

eISBN 978-0-544-66436-4

v1.0516

Inspired by Zoe Anderson (1986–2010).

Life is fleeting. Ideas, inspiration, and love endure.

Prologue

THE NEW AGE OF FIRE

The house lights dim. A woman, her palms sweating, her legs trembling just a little, steps out onto the stage. A spotlight hits her face, and 1,200 pairs of eyes lock onto hers. The audience senses her nervousness. There is palpable tension in the room. She clears her throat and starts to speak.

What happens next is astounding.

The 1,200 brains inside the heads of 1,200 independent individuals start to behave very strangely. They begin to sync up. A magic spell woven by the woman washes over each person. They gasp together. Laugh together. Weep together. And as they do so, something else happens. Rich, neurologically encoded patterns of information inside the woman's brain are somehow copied and transferred to the 1,200 brains in the audience. These patterns will remain in those brains for the rest of their lives, potentially impacting their behavior years into the future.

The woman on the stage is weaving wonder, not witchcraft. But her skills are as potent as any sorcery.

Ants shape each other's behavior by exchanging chemicals. We do it by standing in front of each other, peering into each other's eyes, waving our hands and emitting strange sounds from our mouths. Human-to-human communication is a true wonder of the world. We do it unconsciously every day. And it reaches its most intense form on the public stage.

The purpose of this book is to explain how the miracle of powerful public speaking is achieved, and to equip you to give it your best shot. But one thing needs emphasizing right at the start.

There is no one way to give a great talk. The world of knowledge is far too big and the range of speakers and of audiences and of talk settings is far too varied for that. Any attempt to apply a single set formula is likely to backfire. Audiences see through it in an instant and feel manipulated.

Indeed, even if there were a successful formula at one moment in time, it wouldn't stay successful for long. That's because a key part of the appeal of a great talk is its freshness. We're humans. We don't like same old, same old. If your talk feels too similar to a talk someone has already heard, it is

bound to have less impact. The last thing we want is for everyone to sound the same or for anyone to sound as though he's faking it.

So you should not think of the advice in this book as *rules* prescribing a single way to speak. Instead think of it as offering you a set of *tools* designed to encourage variety. Just use the ones that are right for you and for the speaking opportunity you're facing. Your only real job in giving a talk is to have something valuable to say, and to say it authentically in your own unique way.

You may find it more natural than you think. Public speaking is an ancient art, wired deeply into our minds. Archaeological discoveries dating back hundreds of thousands of years have found community meeting sites where our ancestors gathered around fire. In every culture on earth, as language developed, people learned to share their stories, hopes, and dreams.

Imagine a typical scene. It is after nightfall. The campfire is ablaze. The logs crackle and spit under a starry sky. An elder rises, and all eyes turn and lock onto the wise, wrinkled face, illuminated by the flickering light. The story begins. And as the storyteller speaks, each listener imagines the events that are being described. That imagination brings with it the same emotions shared by the characters in the story. This is a profoundly powerful process. It is the literal alignment of multiple minds into a shared consciousness. For a period of time, the campfire participants act as if they were a single life form. They may rise together, dance together, chant together. From this shared backdrop, it is a short step to the desire to act together, to decide to embark together on a journey, a battle, a building, a celebration.

The same is true today. As a leader—or as an advocate—public speaking is the key to unlocking empathy, stirring excitement, sharing knowledge and insights, and promoting a shared dream.

Indeed, the spoken word has actually gained new powers. Our campfire is now the whole world. Thanks to the Internet, a single talk in a single theater can end up being seen by millions of people. Just as the printing press massively amplified the power of authors, so the web is massively amplifying the impact of speakers. It is allowing anyone anywhere with online access (and within a decade or so, we can expect almost every village on earth to be connected) to summon the world's greatest teachers to their homes and learn from them directly. Suddenly an ancient art has global reach.

This revolution has sparked a renaissance in public speaking. Many of us have suffered years of long, boring lectures at university; interminable sermons at church; or roll-your-eyes predictable political stump speeches. It doesn't have to be that way.

Done right, a talk can electrify a room and transform an audience's worldview. Done right, a talk is more powerful than anything in written form. Writing gives us the words. Speaking brings with it a whole new toolbox. When we peer into a speaker's eyes; listen to the tone of her voice; sense her vulnerability, her intelligence, her passion, we are tapping into unconscious skills that have been fine-tuned over hundreds of thousands of years. Skills that can galvanize, empower, inspire.

What is more, we can enhance these skills in ways the ancients could never have imagined: The ability to show—right there in beautiful high-resolution—any image that a human can photograph or imagine. The ability to weave in video and music. The ability to draw on research tools that present the entire body of human knowledge to anyone in reach of a smartphone.

The good news is, these skills are teachable. They absolutely are. And that means that there's a new superpower that anyone, young or old, can benefit from. It's called *presentation literacy*. We live in an era where the best way to make a dent on the world may no longer be to write a letter to the editor or publish a book. It may be simply to stand up and say something . . . because both the words and the passion with which they are delivered can now spread across the world at warp speed.

In the twenty-first century, presentation literacy should be taught in every school. Indeed, before the era of books, it was considered an absolutely core part of education,¹ albeit under an old-fashioned name: *rhetoric*. Today, in the connected era, we should resurrect that noble art and make it education's fourth *R*: reading, 'riting, 'rithmetic . . . and rhetoric.

The word's core meaning is simply "the art of speaking effectively." Fundamentally, that's the purpose of this book. To recast rhetoric for the modern era. To offer useful stepping-stones toward a new presentation literacy.

Our experience at TED over the last few years can help point the way. TED began as an annual conference, bringing together the fields of technology, entertainment, and design (hence the name). But in recent years it has expanded to cover any topic of public interest. TED speakers seek to

make their ideas accessible to those outside their field by delivering short, carefully prepared talks. And to our delight, this form of public speaking has proved a hit online, to the extent that, as of 2015, more than 1 billion TED Talks are viewed annually.

My colleagues and I have worked with hundreds of TED speakers, helping fine-tune their messages and how they deliver them. These amazing people have completely changed the way we see the world. Over the past decade, we have debated passionately among ourselves how exactly these speakers have achieved what they've achieved. From our lucky ringside seats, we have been intrigued and infuriated, informed and inspired. We have also had the chance to ask them directly for their advice on how to prepare and deliver an amazing talk. Thanks to their brilliance, we've learned dozens of insights into how they achieved something so extraordinary in just a few minutes.

That makes this book a collaborative effort. It's a collaboration with those speakers, and with my talented colleagues, especially Kelly Stoetzel, Bruno Giussani, and Tom Rielly, who curate and host the main TED events with me, and who have had a central role over the years in shaping the TED Talk approach and format and bringing remarkable voices to our platform.

We have also tapped into the collective wisdom of thousands of self-organized TEDx events.² The content emerging from them often surprises and delights us, and it has expanded our understanding of what is possible in a public talk.

TED's mission is to nurture the spread of powerful ideas. We don't care whether this is done through something called TED, TEDx, or in any other form of public speaking. When we hear of other conferences deciding they want to put on TED-style talks, we're thrilled. Ultimately, ideas aren't owned. They have a life of their own. We're delighted to see today's renaissance in the art of public speaking wherever it is happening and whoever is doing it.

So the purpose of this book is not just to describe how to give a TED Talk. It's much broader than that. Its purpose is to support any form of public speaking that seeks to explain, inspire, inform, or persuade; whether in business, education, or on the public stage. Yes, many of the examples in this book are from TED Talks, but that's not only because those are the examples we're most familiar with. TED Talks have generated a lot of excitement in recent years, and we think they have something to offer the

wider world of public speaking. We think the principles that underlie them can act as a powerful basis for a broader presentation literacy.

So you won't find specific tips on giving a toast at a wedding, or a company sales pitch, or a university lecture. But you will find tools and insights that may be useful for those occasions and, indeed, for every form of public speaking. More than that, we hope to persuade you to think about public speaking in a different way, a way that you will find exciting and empowering.

The campfires of old have spawned a new kind of fire. A fire that spreads from mind to mind, screen to screen: the ignition of ideas whose time has come.

This matters. Every meaningful element of human progress has happened only because humans have shared ideas with each other and then collaborated to turn those ideas into reality. From the first time our ancestors teamed up to take down a mammoth to Neil Armstrong's first step onto the moon, people have turned spoken words into astonishing shared achievements.

We need that now more than ever. Ideas that could solve our toughest problems often remain invisible because the brilliant people in whose minds they reside lack the confidence or the know-how to share those ideas effectively. That is a tragedy. At a time when the right idea presented the right way can ripple across the world at the speed of light, spawning copies of itself in millions of minds, there's huge benefit to figuring out how best to set it on its way, both for you, the speaker-in-waiting, and for the rest of us who need to know what you have to say.

Are you ready?

Let's go light a fire.

Chris Anderson
February 2016

FOUNDATION

Foundation

1

PRESENTATION LITERACY

The Skill You Can Build

You're nervous, right?

Stepping out onto a public stage and having hundreds of pairs of eyes turned your way is terrifying. You dread having to stand up in a company meeting and present your project. What if you get nervous and stumble over your words? What if you completely forget what you were going to say? Maybe you'll be humiliated! Maybe your career will crater! Maybe the idea you believe in will stay buried forever!

These are thoughts that can keep you up at night.

But guess what? Almost everyone has experienced the fear of public speaking. Indeed, surveys that ask people to list their top fears often report public speaking as the most widely selected, ahead of snakes, heights—and even death.

How can this be? There is no tarantula hidden behind the microphone. You have zero risk of plunging off the stage to your death. The audience will not attack you with pitchforks. Then why the anxiety?

It's because there's a lot at stake—not just the experience in the moment, but in our longer-term *reputation*. How others think of us matters hugely. We are profoundly social animals. We crave each other's affection, respect, and support. Our future happiness depends on these realities to a shocking degree. And we sense that what happens on a public stage is going to materially affect these social currencies for better or worse.

But with the right mindset, you can use your fear as an incredible asset. It can be the driver that will persuade you to prepare for a talk properly.

That's what happened when Monica Lewinsky came to TED. For her, the stakes couldn't have been higher. Seventeen years earlier, she had been through the most humiliating public exposure imaginable, an experience so intense it almost broke her. Now she was attempting a return to a more visible public life, to reclaim her narrative.

But she was not an experienced public speaker, and she knew that it would be disastrous if she messed up. She told me:

Nervous is too mild a word to describe how I felt. More like . . . Gutted with trepidation. Bolts of fear. Electric anxiety. If we could have harnessed the power of my nerves that morning, I think the energy crisis would have been solved. Not only was I stepping out onto a stage in front of an esteemed and brilliant crowd, but it was also videotaped, with the high likelihood of being made public on a widely viewed platform. I was visited by the echoes of lingering trauma from years of having been publicly ridiculed. Plagued by a deep insecurity I didn't belong on the TED stage. That was the inner experience against which I battled.

And yet Monica found a way to turn that fear around. She used some surprising techniques, which I'll share in [chapter 15](#). Suffice it to say, they worked. Her talk won a standing ovation at the event, rocketed to a million views within a few days, and earned rave reviews online. It even prompted a public apology to her from a longtime critic, feminist author Erica Jong.

The brilliant woman I am married to, Jacqueline Novogratz, was also haunted by fear of public speaking. In school, at college, and into her twenties, the prospect of a microphone and watching eyes was so scary it was debilitating. But she knew that to advance her work fighting poverty, she would have to persuade others, and so she just began forcing herself to do it. Today she gives scores of speeches every year, often earning standing ovations.

Indeed, everywhere you look, there are stories of people who were terrified of public speaking but found a way to become really good at it, from Eleanor Roosevelt to Warren Buffett to Princess Diana, who was known to all as “shy Di” and hated giving speeches, but found a way to speak informally in her own voice, and the world fell in love with her.

If you can get a talk right, the upside can be amazing. Take the talk that entrepreneur Elon Musk gave to SpaceX employees on August 2, 2008.

Musk was not known as a great public speaker. But that day, his words marked an important turning point for his company. SpaceX had already suffered two failed launches. This was the day of the third launch, and everyone knew failure could force the company's closure. The *Falcon*

rocket soared off the launch pad, but right after the first stage fell away, disaster struck. The spacecraft exploded. The video feed went dead. Some 350 employees had gathered and, as described by Dolly Singh, the company's head of talent acquisition, the mood was thick with despair. Musk emerged to speak to them. He told them they'd always known it would be hard, but that despite what had happened, they had already accomplished something that day that few nations, let alone companies, had achieved. They had successfully completed the first stage of a launch and taken a spacecraft to outer space. They simply had to pick themselves up and get back to work. Here's how Singh described the talk's climax:

Then Elon said, with as much fortitude and ferocity as he could muster after having been awake for like 20+ hours by this point, "For my part, I will never give up and I mean never." I think most of us would have followed him into the gates of hell carrying suntan oil after that. It was the most impressive display of leadership that I have ever witnessed. Within moments the energy of the building went from despair and defeat to a massive buzz of determination as people began to focus on moving forward instead of looking back.

That's the power of a single talk. You might not be leading an organization, but a talk can still open new doors or transform a career.

TED speakers have told us delightful stories of the impact of their talks. Yes, there are sometimes book and movie offers, higher speaking fees, and unexpected offers of financial support. But the most appealing stories are of ideas advanced, and lives changed. Amy Cuddy gave a hugely popular talk about how changing your body language can raise your confidence level. She has had more than 15,000 messages from people around the world, telling her how that wisdom has helped them.

And young Malawian inventor William Kamkwamba's inspiring talk about building a windmill in his village as a fourteen-year-old sparked a series of events that led to him being accepted into an engineering program at Dartmouth College.

THE DAY TED MIGHT HAVE DIED

Here's a story from my own life: When I first took over leadership of TED in late 2001, I was reeling from the near collapse of the company I had spent fifteen years building, and I was terrified of another huge public failure. I had been struggling to persuade the TED community to back my vision for TED, and I feared that it might just fizzle out. Back then, TED was an annual conference in California, owned and hosted by a charismatic architect named Richard Saul Wurman, whose larger-than-life presence infused every aspect of the conference. About eight hundred people attended every year, and most of them seemed resigned to the fact that TED probably couldn't survive once Wurman departed. The TED conference of February 2002 was the last one to be held under his leadership, and I had one chance and one chance only to persuade TED attendees that the conference would continue just fine. I had never run a conference before, however, and despite my best efforts over several months at marketing the following year's event, only seventy people had signed up for it.

Early on the last morning of that conference, I had 15 minutes to make my case. And here's what you need to know about me: I am not naturally a great speaker. I say *um* and *you know* far too often. I will stop halfway through a sentence, trying to find the right word to continue. I can sound overly earnest, soft-spoken, conceptual. My quirky British sense of humor is not always shared by others.

I was so nervous about this moment, and so worried that I would look awkward on the stage, that I couldn't even bring myself to stand. Instead I rolled forward a chair from the back of the stage, sat on it, and began.

I look back at that talk now and cringe—a lot. If I were critiquing it today, there are a hundred things I would change, starting with the wrinkly white T-shirt I was wearing. And yet . . . I had prepared carefully what I wanted to say, and I knew there were at least some in the audience desperate for TED to survive. If I could just give those supporters a reason to get excited, perhaps they would turn things around. Because of the recent dot-com bust, many in the audience had suffered business losses as bad as my own. Maybe I could connect with them that way?

I spoke from the heart, with as much openness and conviction as I could summon. I told people I had just gone through a massive business failure. That I'd come to think of myself as a complete loser. That the only way I'd survived mentally was by immersing myself in the world of ideas. That TED had come to mean the world to me—that it was a unique place where

ideas from every discipline could be shared. That I would do all in my power to preserve its best values. That, in any case, the conference had brought such intense inspiration and learning to us that we couldn't possibly let it die . . . could we?

Oh, and I broke the tension with an apocryphal anecdote about France's Madame de Gaulle and how she shocked guests at a diplomatic dinner by expressing her desire for "*a penis*." In England, I said, we also had that desire, although there we pronounced it *happiness*, and TED had brought genuine happiness my way.

To my utter amazement, at the end of the talk, Jeff Bezos, the head of Amazon, who was seated in the center of the audience, rose to his feet and began clapping. And the whole room stood with him. It was as if the TED community had collectively decided, in just a few seconds, that it would support this new chapter of TED after all. And in the 60-minute break that followed, some 200 people committed to buying passes for the following year's conference, guaranteeing its success.

If that 15-minute talk had fizzled, TED would have died, four years before ever putting a talk on the Internet. You would not be reading this book.

In the next chapter, I'll share why I think that talk ended up being effective, despite its evident awkwardness. It's an insight that can be applied to any talk.

No matter how little confidence you might have today in your ability to speak in public, there are things you can do to turn that around. Facility with public speaking is not a gift granted at birth to a lucky few. It's a broad-ranging set of skills. There are hundreds of ways to give a talk, and everyone can find an approach that's right for them and learn the skills necessary to do it well.

THE BOY WITH THE LION-HEART

A couple of years ago, TED's content director, Kelly Stoetzel, and I went on a global tour in search of speaking talent. In Nairobi, Kenya, we met Richard Turere, a twelve-year-old Maasai boy who had come up with a surprising invention. His family raised cattle, and one of the biggest challenges was protecting them at night from lion attacks. Richard had noticed that a stationary campfire didn't deter the lions, but walking around

waving a torch did seem to work. The lions were apparently afraid of moving lights! Richard had somehow taught himself electronics by messing around with parts taken from his parents' radio. He used that knowledge to devise a system of lights that would turn on and off in sequence, creating a sense of movement. It was built from scrapyard parts—solar panels, a car battery, and a motorcycle indicator box. He installed the lights and—presto!—the lion attacks stopped. News of his invention spread and other villages wanted in. Instead of seeking to kill the lions as they had done before, they installed Richard's "lion lights." Both villagers and pro-lion environmentalists were happy.

It was an impressive achievement but, at first glance, Richard certainly seemed an unlikely TED speaker. He stood hunched over in a corner of the room, painfully shy. His English was halting, and he struggled to describe his invention coherently. It was hard to imagine him on a stage in California in front of 1,400 people, slotted alongside Sergey Brin and Bill Gates.

But Richard's story was so compelling that we went ahead anyway and invited him to come give a TED Talk. In the months before the conference, we worked with him to frame his story—to find the right place to begin, and to develop a natural narrative sequence. Because of his invention, Richard had won a scholarship to one of Kenya's best schools, where he had the chance to practice his TED Talk several times in front of a live audience. This helped build his confidence to the point where his personality could shine through.

He got on an airplane for the first time in his life and flew to Long Beach, California. As he walked onto the TED stage, you could tell he was nervous, but that only made him more engaging. As Richard spoke, people were hanging on his every word, and every time he smiled, the audience melted. When he finished, people just stood and cheered.

Richard's tale can encourage us all to believe we might be able to give a decent talk. Your goal is not to be Winston Churchill or Nelson Mandela. It's to be you. If you're a scientist, be a scientist; don't try to be an activist. If you're an artist, be an artist; don't try to be an academic. If you're just an ordinary person, don't try to fake some big intellectual style; just be you. You don't have to raise a crowd to its feet with a thunderous oration. Conversational sharing can work just as well. In fact, for most audiences, it's a lot better. If you know how to talk to a group of friends over dinner, then you know enough to speak publicly.

And technology is opening up new options. We live in an age where you don't have to be able to speak to thousands of people at a time to have an outsized impact. It could just be you talking intimately to a video camera, and letting the Internet do the rest.

Presentation literacy isn't an optional extra for the few. It's a core skill for the twenty-first century. It's the most impactful way to share who you are and what you care about. If you can learn to do it, your self-confidence will flourish, and you may be amazed at the beneficial impact it can have on your success in life, however you might choose to define that.

If you commit to being the authentic you, I am certain that you will be capable of tapping into the ancient art that is wired inside us. You simply have to pluck up the courage to try.