Chapter 2

TED and Learning from Others

Factoids

TED stands for *Technology, Entertainment, Design* and was founded in 1984 as a one-off event.

TED organize conferences under the slogan "Ideas Worth Spreading".

TED originally focused on technology and design, but now the conferences include scientific, cultural, and academic topics - some very serious, some very funny.

Presenters have a maximum of 18 minutes to deliver their ideas in innovative and engaging ways, including using a story-format.

Three of the shortest TEDs, all under 3.30, are entitled: *Try something new for 30 days; 8 secrets of success*; and *How to start a movement.*

Over 2000 talks are freely available on the website and have been watched over one billion times worldwide.

TED has become a regular word in the dictionary: *I watched two TEDs today. Did you watch that TED on …?*

TED is watched by millions of non-native speakers who can use subtitles (in English, or their own language), or see the full transcript (again in English or their own language). TED's Open Translation Project aims to reach out to the 4.5 billion people who do not speak English. TED also has its own series of short books.

2.1   What's the buzz?

Think about the answers to these questions.

1. TED's mission as stated on their website is: *TED is a global community, welcoming people from every discipline and culture who seek a deeper understanding of the world. We believe passionately in the power of ideas to change attitudes, lives and, ultimately, the world. On TED.com, we're building a clearinghouse of free knowledge from the world's most inspired thinkers — and a community of curious souls to engage with ideas and each other.* How important and how achievable do you think this mission is?

2. Have you seen any TED presentations? Which ones do you like the most?

3. Are TED presentations different from the kinds of presentations you have seen at your university or at conferences in your country? Do you think it would be appropriate to use a TED-style presentation at your next conference? Why (not)?

4. Which features of TED do you use? Have you ever tried the 'surprise me' feature or used the playlists?

5. Do you watch in English? With or without subtitles?

6. Have you ever based your own presentations on the style and/or structure of a TED presentation?

7. How can you use TED to improve your speaking style and pronunciation?

8. Is it possible to learn from others? Do we tend to be blind to our own mistakes?

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This chapter discusses the benefits of TED by analysing some typical TED presentations. It also provides checklists to enable you to assess the slides and presentation styles of various presenters (not just TED presenters, but your colleagues too, and of course yourself).

You can access TED from your computer or by downloading the TED app onto your smartphone.

Most of what is said in this chapter will make much more sense if you actually watch the TED presentations in subsections 2.3-2.6.

In addition to TED, there are several sites on the Web dedicated to presentations. There are some where you can share slides, for example:

slideshare.net

myplick.com

authorstream.com/slideshows/

These sites are useful for seeing how other people in similar fields to yours create their slides. Examining these presentations should help you to understand that packing a presentation full of detail is not usually a good approach.

2.2 Choosing a TED presentation and learning the benefits

You can choose the topic of the presentations you want to watch by using TED's search engine, and you can also choose whether to have English subtitles on or not. The subtitles report every single word, and are particularly useful for seeing (not just hearing) how many words a presenter uses in a sentence. This highlights that the shorter the sentence is, the easier it is for the presenter to say, and the easier it is for the audience to understand.

You can see or download a full transcript (called 'interactive transcript') of the presentation in English, plus translations in several other languages. This means that you can note down any useful phrases that the speaker uses that you think you could use too.

By reading the transcript and listening to the presentation at the same time, you can also improve your pronunciation and intonation by trying to imitate the presenter.

A good TED presentation to start with is Jay Walker's *English Mania* (19.5). Jay's talk highlights how preparation, and speaking clearly and slowly in very short sentences, are key to a good presentation. This presentation is less than five minutes long and is easy to follow even without subtitles!

2.3 TED example with use of slides: *Let's bridge the digital divide!*

You may be concerned that many of the presentations you watch on TED are given by very dynamic presenters. Economist Aleph Molinari in his presentation *Let's bridge the digital divide!* is not dynamic, he doesn't run around the stage entertaining us. But he does know how to inform us and how to bring important data to our attention, which is all you need to give a good presentation at an international conference. For another example of a good but not particularly dynamic presenter see Jay Walker (19.5).

In his presentation, Aleph Molinari tells us that five billion people don't have access to the Internet and then explains what we should do about it. This presentation may seem rather dated when you watch it, so concentrate not on the statistics themselves but on how Molinari presents these statistics.

EXAMPLES AND STATISTICS

Aleph immediately starts with concrete examples of victims of the digital divide. He then moves on to some statistics. He shows a slide with the number of people in the world: 6,930,055,154.

Why not 7bn? Because the length and exactness of the number emphasizes firstly the incredible number of people who live on our planet and at the same time that they are individuals. The long number also looks dramatic on the screen. But when he actually mentions the number verbally he says "nearly seven billion people" - there would be no point in reading the exact number. He then gives the number of people who are digitally included, which on the slide appears as 2,095,006,005. What he says is "Out of these, approximately two billion are digitally included, this is approximately 30% of the entire world population, which means that the remaining 70% of the world, close to five billion people, do not have access to a computer or the Internet .. five billion people, that's four times the population of India".

Aleph's technique is thus to:

1. show a statistic in a simple clear way (i.e. not along with several other distracting statistics)
2. talk about the statistic in three ways (first as a whole number, then as a percentage, then by comparison with India). Aleph thus offers his audience different ways of absorbing the information, his aim being to help them to really understand the true significance of the numbers involved
3. interpret the statistic by saying what the implications are

TEXT, BACKGROUNDS AND FONTS

Aleph's slides have a black background with a yellow font. They are incredibly clear. The majority of his slides that contain text only have one or two words. The slide with the most text, which is his first slide and contains a definition of the digital divide, contains 19 words. At least half his slides are just photographs, which support his speech. Essentially, the information contained on each of his slides can be absorbed in less than two seconds. This means that all the audience can listen to him with 100% of their concentration, rather than some of the audience reading the slides and some listening to him.

ALEPH'S PRESENTING STYLE

I may be wrong, but I imagine that Aleph is quite introverted. This reveals itself in the fact that he spends too much time (in my opinion) looking at the screen rather than the audience. Although he does try to emphasize his key words, his voice is rather monotonous. The combination of these two factors could lead to the audience losing interest.

However, Aleph compensates for this lack of dynamism by

- having a clear logical structure

- having excellent slides - clear, easy to follow

- being professional

This makes him very credible in the audience's eyes. They will certainly be motivated to follow him and listen to what he has to say. And this also means that although his conclusion in itself lacks impact (his voice does not sound very impassioned), as a whole his presentation will have a positive impact because he appears to the audience as being totally committed to his project and also very sincere.

2.4   TED example with minimal slides, delivered from a lectern: *The forgotten history of autism*

The TED website introduces this presentation as follows:

> Decades ago, few pediatricians had heard of autism. In 1975, 1 in 5,000 kids was estimated to have it. Today, 1 in 68 is on the autism spectrum. What caused this steep rise? Steve Silberman points to "a perfect storm of autism awareness" — a pair of psychologists with an accepting view, an unexpected pop culture moment and a new clinical test. But to really understand, we have to go back further to an Austrian doctor by the name of Hans Asperger, who published a pioneering paper in 1944. Because it was buried in time, autism has been shrouded in misunderstanding ever since.

This presentation contains only four slides - one graph and three photos.

FULLY WRITTEN SPEECH

Steve is speaking from a lectern upon which he has his full speech. He looks down frequently (but very rapidly) to remind himself what to say next. If someone on TED can rely on looking at their written speech, then so can you. A better option however, may be just to have notes (see 19.5, and also see 13.6 and 15.2 on how to use your smartphone).

STRUCTURE

There is a clear logical structure - i) introduction to the issue of autism, ii) how and where misconceptions arose, iii) how these misconceptions were overcome, and iv) finally the positive aspects of autism and the key contribution of having a diversity of brainpowers in our society.

EYE CONTACT

Notice how Steve looks at one section of the audience for a few seconds, and then turns his head to look at another section. Maintaining eye contact is essential to maintaining audience attention.

GRAPH

Steve only uses one graph. Note how the information on the graph is extremely simple to absorb very quickly.

BODY LANGUAGE

When you are standing at a lectern there is less opportunity to use your body. However Steve makes great use of his hands to emphasize points (see at 4.0, 5.45, 7.23, 12.32 minutes)

VOICE

When reading from a prepared script, there is a danger of adopting a monotone. Note how Steve modulates his voice to give emphasis and raise the audience's interest in specific points.

2.5 What might Steve have done differently if he had been giving a more formal version of his talk at an international conference made up of a multilingual audience?

I think he would simply have used more slides for the following:

STATISTICS: He mentions a number of statistics. Given that numbers can be quite difficult to process by speakers of another language, and given that some English numbers can create confusion (e.g. *thirteen* vs *thirty*), having the numbers on a slide is useful.

MORE PHOTOS: He mentions the famous movie *Rain Man* starring Dustin Hoffman. It might have been useful to see a photo of the movie poster. There is a chance that the audience knows the name of the film in a translated version and may pronounce Dustin Hoffman in a very different way. This means that they may miss the point.

QUOTATIONS: He quotes from many people and it might have been helpful for the audience (as well as creating variety) to have seen these quotes on a slide - after all his quotes were well chosen as they were all very concise.

When you are giving a presentation from the lectern you have fewer opportunities to engage your audience and attract their attention. Having a few slides will grab the audience's attention if they are becoming distracted due to the mental effort required to follow someone who is speaking a language that is not their own.

2.6 TED example delivered from a lectern: *This is what it's like to teach in North Korea*

Suki Kim's talk begins as follows:

> In 2011, during the final six months of Kim Jong-Il's life, I lived undercover in North Korea.
>
> I was born and raised in South Korea, their enemy. I live in America, their other enemy.
>
> Since 2002, I had visited North Korea a few times. And I had come to realize that to write about it with any meaning, or to understand the place beyond the regime's propaganda, the only option was total immersion. So I posed as a teacher and a missionary at an all-male university in Pyongyang.
>
> The Pyongyang University of Science and Technology was founded by Evangelical Christians who cooperate with the regime to educate the sons of the North Korean elite, without proselytizing, which is a capital crime there. The students were 270 young men, expected to be the future leaders of the most isolated and brutal dictatorship in existence. When I arrived, they became my students.
>
> 2011 was a special year, marking the 100th anniversary of the birth of North Korea's original Great Leader, Kim Il-Sung. To celebrate the occasion, the regime shut down all universities, and sent students off to the fields to build the DPRK's much-heralded ideal as the world's most powerful and prosperous nation. My students were the only ones spared from that fate.

I have chosen this talk because apart from being a very moving and interesting presentation, it is a wonderful example of how to speak clear English. Suki Kim is not a native speaker, although she does speak almost perfect English in this talk.

You can learn a lot from Suki about how to speak slowly (around 100 words per minute) and enunciate each word very clearly. She is able to do this, because like Steve Silberman (see 2.4), she is reading from a prepared speech.

Her script contains a series of relatively short sentences. The average sentence length is 17 words. She has one long sentence (34 words - the first sentence in the fourth paragraph), but this sentence has places for natural pauses (*who …, which …*). She also has two 7-letter sentences, where she is able to be more dramatic.

She wrote her script in a way that would enable her to read it aloud without difficulty. She also wrote it in short paragraphs. This means that at the end of each

paragraph she would remember to have a longer pause than the time she paused at the end of each sentence.

Whether you are a scientist or humanist, you can certainly see the advantages of having a written script - for more on this see Chapter 3.

I strongly recommend that in any case, you watch this extremely powerful and inspiring talk.

2.7   What can you learn from these three TED presentations?

1) *Dynamism is not key to a good presentation*

None of the three presenters were particularly dynamic, none of them were funny or tried to tell any kind of humorous anecdote (which in any case can be dangerous).

This was in fact one of the reasons why I chose these three presenters. Being dynamic and entertaining is great, but certainly not essential. So, although you may not be a 'born presenter' this should not stop you from giving a good presentation.

2) *Consider reducing the number of slides*

Most TED presenters use a minimal number of slides, and some use none at all.

If you are a 'scientist' you may be likely to use more slides in your own presentations, but by watching TED you will understand why and when it is possible to reduce the number of slides.

If you are a 'humanist' you may not be required to use slides. However this puts a lot of pressure on both you and the audience (they have to concentrate just on your voice and what you are saying and maybe easily distracted). TED has many examples of where the presenter just speaks and you can learn a lot from their techniques.

3) *Preparation helps to ensure the level of credibility and memorability of your presentation*

What the three presentations outlined in the three previous subsections all have in common, is that it is clear that the presenters were well prepared. The audience feel that they are being led forward in a logical progression and that the presenter has spent a considerable amount of time practising his/her presentation. This gives each presenter credibility in the eyes of the audience, and also helps to make their presentation memorable.

In fact, it is probably these two factors - credibility and memorability - that you should aim for. And you can achieve them through:

- uncomplicated language

- loud, clear, reasonably slow voice

- simple slides

- a clear logical structure

2.8   Should you opt for TED-style presentations?

Should you aim to give a TED-style presentation at your next conference? Probably not. The aim of TED presentations is to get an interesting message across to the audience, rather than necessarily presenting some key results of research that someone has done. If you are a scientist your presentations are likely to be more technical and require more slides. If you are a humanist, you may not have such an interesting story to tell as some of the TED presenters.

Another difference from TED is that at a presentation at an international conference, the aim of your presentation should not be merely to inform (or entertain). You should also be trying to 'sell' yourself, to get yourself noticed by other research teams who might be able to collaborate with you in your projects, or even invite you for an internship in their lab.

2.9   TED viewers rarely comment on non-native speakers' use of English

TED.com allows viewers to 'discuss' what they have watched. What is interesting is that nearly all the comments are on the content of the presentation rather than the delivery. This is true also for talks given by non-native presenters.

A classic example of this is Philippe Starck the well-known French product designer's talk entitled *Design and destiny*. Starck's talk is worth watching in order to prove to yourself that even if you don't have a good English accent it doesn't necessarily matter. His technique for dealing with his poor English is to immediately draw attention to it in a self-deprecating way by saying: *You will understand nothing with my type of English*.

His pronunciation is terrible. At least 20% of his first 100 words contain pronunciation mistakes (e.g. *'ere* instead of *here*, *zat* instead of *that*, the *u* in *usually* pronounced like the *u* in *under* rather than the *u* in *universe*) and he consistently puts the stress on the wrong part of a multi-syllable word (e.g. *com<u>for</u>table*, *impos<u>tor</u>*). He makes a series of grammar mistakes: forgetting the plural *s*, using the wrong part of the verb etc.

But because the audience are interested in what he is saying rather than how he is saying it, his poor English skills are not a problem. In fact if you read the comments on his presentation, not one reference is made to his poor English. Instead many viewers simply write: *Superb! Fantastic! Really the most brilliant talk I've heard on TED*.

However, note that Starck does speak slowly. If he had spoken very fast, his poor accent would probably have interfered with the audience's ability to understand him.

So, it is worth highlighting again: providing that the presenter does a reasonable job, audiences are more interested in content than in the presenter's use of English.

2.10   Note down what you remember about the presentations you watch

When you have watched five or six presentations on TED (or whatever site), write down what you remember about the content and about the presenter and his/her style. You will be surprised how little you remember about the information that was given. Repeat the same memory exercise a week later and you probably won't even remember how many presentations you watched. Instead, you will remember the impression that the presenter made on you and their style of presenting for much longer.

What this means is that there is no point filling your presentation with descriptions of complex procedures or masses of data, because the audience will simply not remember. What they will remember from that experience is their frustration in not being able to absorb the information that you gave them. Make sure you always give your audience a positive experience.

2.11   Assess other people's presentations

You can learn a lot from the presentations you watch, and not just from those on TED. Use the assessment sheet on the next page to decide which presentation styles you liked and why. Then you can perhaps think of ways to incorporate these aspects into your own presentations.

Also, analyse the audience's reaction. Is the audience attentive? Are you yourself attentive? Notice when and why the presenter starts to lose your attention. If you stop watching, at what point did you stop watching and why?

2.12   Using TED talks

I personally would like to thank the organization for providing one of the best ways of learning English on the Internet. This was clearly not their original intention, but is a fantastic byproduct of a fantastic service. See page 277 to learn about permissions to use TED presentations.

Assessment Sheet

	THE PRESENTER TENDS TO DO THIS	RATHER THAN THIS
CORE FOCUS	clarifies the main point of the presentation immediately - it is clear to audience why they should listen	the main point only emerges towards the end - audience not clear where the presentation is going
PACE / SPEED	varies the pace i.e. speaks slowly for key points, faster for more obvious information; pauses occasionally	maintains the same speed throughout; no pauses
BODY LANGUAGE	eyes on audience, moves hands, stands away from the screen, moves from one side of the screen to the other	eyes on screen, PC, ceiling, floor; static, blocks screen
STRUCTURE	each new point is organically connected to the previous point	there are no clear transitions or connections
FORMALITY	sounds natural, enthusiastic, sincere	sounds rather robotic and non spontaneous
STYLE	narrative: you want to hear what happened next	technical, passive forms
	lots of personal pronouns and active forms of verbs	
LANGUAGE	dynamic, adjectives, very few linkers (*also, in addition, moreover, in particular*, etc)	very formal, no emotive adjectives, many linkers
RELATION WITH AUDIENCE	involves / entertains the audience - thus maintaining their attention	seems to be talking to him/ herself not to the audience
TEXT IN SLIDES	little or no text	a lot of text
GRAPHICS	simple graphics or complex graphics built up gradually	complex graphics
ABSTRACT VS CONCRETE	gives examples	focuses on abstract theory
STATISTICS	gives counterintuitive / interesting facts	makes little or no use of facts / statistics
AT THE END	you are left feeling inspired / positive	you are indifferent

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