

How do I give an engaging talk?

Presenting, storytelling and speaking with the public

Before you read: Have you considered if a talk is the best way to achieve what you need to? You might be interested in reading our planning toolkit. This will help you identify your aims and a suitable format.

While your engagement activity is likely to be interactive and two-way, you may find that you need to include a talk at some point. Often before dialogue can take place, an element of shared understanding needs to be achieved. That might be via a short presentation, a comedy sketch, an introduction to a workshop or a description of a demonstration. This guide will help you give a talk that will achieve maximum impact. It will discuss how to structure and deliver your talk while keeping the audience's experience in mind.

1 | Talks that have impact

Even a short well-structured talk can have a significant effect on the audience. It can inspire people to get on board with a new idea, change perspectives and act.

Once the speaker/s have introduced themselves, a well-structured talk usually takes the following basic format:

- **Opening:** Tell them what you are going to tell them
E.g. "I'm going to be talking to you about what CRISPR is, how it can be used and the impacts it can have on science and society."
- **Middle:** Tell them
- **End:** Tell them what you've told them
E.g. "To summarise, in this talk we've gone through..."

Note: There's lots you can add to this format (see below information about "hooks") but following this structure helps ensure you are sticking to your key message. Talks often involve speaking to groups at a time. Therefore, you need to achieve your impact in limited time and with multiple people all at once. It helps to have a very clear message, something you can describe in one sentence. This message should be embedded into the minds of your audience by the end of the talk. Consequently, every decision you make in terms of what to include and how to present it can be made with this goal in mind.

What's your key message?

Your key message will be related to your aim for the talk. What do you want to achieve with the talk and therefore what should the audience know? If you don't have an aim yet, see our planning resource. Alternatively, if you've been asked to give a talk by someone else, start to think about what you could achieve with it. Who are your audience and what do you want them to walk away knowing, feeling or doing? Remember, you should be able to describe your key message in **one sentence**.

2 | The body of the talk

To plan the body of your talk you might wish to consider two things:

- What does my audience need to know to access and **understand** this message?
- What does my audience need to hear to **engage** with this message?

For example, if your key message is *'CRISPR will change society for the better'*, then you will need to explain what CRISPR is before the audience can understand its societal impact. Ensure that your talk is accessible,

interesting and relevant to your audience (this means no jargon!). You'll then need to convince them that the benefits outweigh the disadvantages. Top tip: don't aim to do this by dismissing the disadvantages – be sure to acknowledge them! Read our guide to on engagement with controversial issues for more on this.

Your explanation and persuasion will make up the meat of your talk. As you are adding content keep asking yourself whether it helps the audience to access and understand the key message.

Reiterating your key message

You should repeat your key message multiple times to make it clear. Impactful talks will often have their key message in the title, and it will be said during the talk. Inserting it into a talk two or three times will embed it into your audience's minds, as well as reminding them what the talk is about as you're delivering it.

3 | Hooks

We can't always know what state of mind an audience will be in when we arrive to give a talk. They may have been listening to talks all day, or maybe they're only there to kill some time. Because of this, it's important to pique their interest straight away using a hook. Since listening to a talk is a passive activity, audiences can become disengaged if they aren't finding it interesting or are struggling to understand it. Therefore, you can also include hooks during your talk to boost interest (particularly if it's a long one!)

Below are examples of some hooks you might use:

Hook	Explanation	Example
Anecdote	Tell a story about yourself. What interesting thing happened to you and what did you learn from this? How can you build your research journey into a story?	'When I was 7 I learned a lesson about curiosity that proved extremely important for my scientific career...'
Question	Ask the audience a question and get them to actively think about your subject. Give them plenty of time to answer.	'Raise your hands if you think Facebook is selling your data. Interesting...well let's find out if you're right.'
Interaction	Interact with the audience in some way. Could you get them to vote on something? Or take part in game?	'Let's play a maths game. I want you to choose a number and I'm going to figure out what it is.'
Demonstration	Bring some props onto the stage and give a demonstration. This is good if you are talking about a new technology.	'Here I have a spray that makes your clothing impossible to stain. Let me show you how it works...'
Teaser	Tease the audience with some information you'll offer later. Make sure you deliver on any promises!	'I'm going to tell you 10 facts about the universe and the 7th one is really shocking!'

Hook	Explanation	Example
Surprise	Get the attention of your audience with something they don't expect or find contradictory. Be sure to clear this up through your talk!	'I'm a climatologist and I don't think the data for climate change is convincing!' [Later explaining that data isn't enough to convince the public]
Humour	Telling jokes will entertain your audience and keep them interested – but should be used with caution!	'It used to be you could have a polite conversation by sticking to the weather and your health. But these days with climate change and vaccines – they aren't safe either!'
Linking	Link your talk to your audience. What priorities, needs or interests do they have?	'How many of us worry about our phone battery dying?'

Note: Hooks work best when they're tied to the key message. They should be relevant to your narrative!

4 | Slides and visual aids

If you look at the most engaging TED talks, they rarely rely on slides and that's because slides are often the least engaging thing about a talk. Just like any tool, slides have specific functions and when they're not performing those functions they're distracting your audience, diverting precious attention away from you. Therefore it's key to first write your script or outline, then look to see if you really need slides at any point. Here are some tips for using slides:

Try to avoid:

Having too much (or even any) text – It's trickier for your audience to read and listen at the same time. Remember, slides are to complement your message for the benefit of your audience, they are not a place for your notes!

Spoilers – Often people place all their content in bullet points on a slide but this kills intrigue. Your audience will read faster than you speak and will know exactly what you'll talk about next while they wait for you to catch up.

Small images – If using an image or a graph, give it all your screen space. Otherwise your audience may have trouble seeing it.

Unnecessary data – It is tempting to use graphs on slides but try to ensure that it only includes the data your audience needs to see otherwise it can be distracting.

Using slides well:

Heading – A word or short phrase on an otherwise blank slide can act as a heading. It's processed quickly and reminds your audience what you're talking about.

Clarification – Sometimes text is useful to the audience when they need to see something exactly as written. For example, a quote, equation or a URL to a website.

Explaining visually – Often it's much easier to explain something by showing an image or diagram. In these instances having a slide can help to enhance the audience's experience.

Scene-setting – Images can be powerful and can set a scene. For example, using a vivid picture of a live coral reef and contrasting this with a dead one. The image brings the audience into 'your world'.

For each slide, keep questioning yourself. Is this enhancing your speech or merely repeating it? Is it causing a distraction?

Blank slide

Blank slides can be just as impactful! They allow more connection between you and your audience as they let you be the most important thing to look at in the room. If you are showing your audience something on a slide and then switch to a blank one, this is a sign there is no longer anything to see on screen and their attention should be diverted to you – a good time to make an important point.

5 | Other talk structures

The basic structure above is flexible and will allow you freedom to create any kind of talk that suits your subject. You might also find some inspiration by taking a look at some more specific structures below.

Hook-novelty-action – Start with something to hook the audience in, explain a novel idea and then inspire them to some sort of action.

Demonstration – If you can demonstrate a scientific concept or new technology, start with the demonstration and then explain what happened.

Problem-solution – Describe a problem and then build to the solution.

Chronology – Structure your talk around the chronology of events. A looped chronology is one that starts at the climax, then goes back to the beginning and builds back up to it.

Story – Tell it like a story. This usually involves a protagonist who encounters a problem that they struggle to overcome and leave the experience changed.

6 | Delivering your talk

There is no one way to deliver a talk and it's important to maintain your own personality and mannerisms. You will come across as genuine and relaxed if you present how you feel most comfortable. However, there are some general things to bear in mind that will help to improve your delivery:

Equipment check – To avoid technical errors, arrive early and test anything you're using (microphone, projector, video link). This will prevent any delays and worries you might have.

Speed – Speaking too fast is one of the most common issues that people have, either as they're conscious of time or because they want the talk to be over as fast as possible! However, speaking slower will not only enable your audience to understand but you'll appear more confident too. If you're struggling, try adding purposeful pauses after each sentence.

Pitch and volume – Pitch and volume are not naturally static but change as we weave through language. Maintaining the same pitch or volume (whatever it is) will bore your audience. Instead use it to signal to your audience the emotion behind your words.

Eye contact – The smaller the group, the more you should try and make eye-contact with your audience. Eye contact is a chance to connect with your audience and bring them on board with what you're saying.

Movement – Use movement to emphasise your points or illustrate what you are saying. Then aim to root yourself to the spot for important or serious points. And finally, avoid turning your back on the audience!

Top tip

The best way to improve your presentation manner and style is to film yourself presenting and then watch it back. As awkward as you might feel, this is the best way to spot areas where you could improve. In particular, consider:

- how quickly you are speaking
- any patterns in your movement or gestures
- the tone and volume of your voice
- how you delivered or explained the most important or complex points.



Case study: The Science of Star Trek

What is it?

The Science of Star Trek was a talk delivered by Dr Roberto Trotta at the 2018 Imperial Festival.

Why is it a good example?

The speaker opens with a very engaging and surprising hook that has the audience laughing and applauding instantly. He then proceeds to ask them a question bringing a nice element of interactivity into the talk and quickly building rapport with his audience. This before he goes on to tell his audience what he's going to be telling them. His slides that follow are engaging and relevant with images taking up whole slides and very little text. He uses body language well to emphasise points and direct the audience where he wants them to look: if he wants them to look at the slide, he will look up at the slide; if he wants them to look at him, he will look directly at them.



Further reading – let us know of others!

TED – How to make a presentation

www.ted.com/playlists/574/how_to_make_a_great_presentation

A playlist from TED to help you with your presentation skills.

TED – 10 tips for better slide decks

<https://blog.ted.com/10-tips-for-better-slide-decks/>

More advice from TED on how to improve your slides.

Forbes – Confessions of a former public speaking trainer

www.forbes.com/sites/work-in-progress/2012/04/19/public-speaking-trainer-confesses-dont-waste-your-money-on-this/

Article from Forbes explaining why overly refining your technique can be a bad idea.