

WHAT MAKES A POWERFUL TED TALK?

It has an idea at its center.

This statement in some ways is very obvious, but can be subtle in the way it plays out. In fact, the most common reason that a seemingly strong talk fails is that it simply lacks a central idea.

It's not just a personal story.

This is the biggest challenge found in TEDx talks. Many of them are what you might call 'stories of self' which offer compelling antecedents from a person's life, but no central idea that wraps the narrative together.

These are heart-breaking, because they're often wonderful, fascinating, popular talks that offer great insights into local culture. But without the wrap-around of an idea, they're just stories, or biographical sketches. They aren't idea-centered talks

It's not a lecture.

This is the second most common challenge: an expert delivers a rather fascinating fact-filled lecture, but it lacks a central idea. It can be a bit confusing to define the difference between a "lecture" and a "TEDx talk." One way to think is that lectures deliver facts; talks offer an idea (preferably with facts as well!).

It's about an idea, not an issue.

Many speakers are oriented toward social change; they've identified a real problem in the world, and have set out to improve it. But the way they approach the topic, as an "issue" or an "idea", determines how TEDx-like the talk feels. Idea-based talks are energizing and captivating.

But issue-based talks can be exhausting; they create compassion fatigue. How to avoid this? Re-frame the talk. Here are three ways to think about it:

1. An issue exposes a problem. An idea proposes a solution.
2. An issue says, "Isn't this terrible?" An idea says, "Isn't this interesting"
3. An issue-based talk leads with morality. An idea-based talk leads with curiosity.

It has a clear articulation of the idea.

Often when people share their work, they forget to offer a clear succinct articulation of what they actually do. This is especially important for artists and scientists, whose presentations may focus more on their work, than on an "idea".

It's focused.

Many, if not most, speakers have trouble paring down the material for their talk. They usually try to cover too much. As we all know, TEDx talks are short. 18 minutes at the most. And that's long enough for exactly one idea, without too much background or buildup. The challenge, always, is narrowing the topic down sufficiently and choosing the right contextual elements to support the argument.

It starts strong.

Have your talks start strong, with a clear focused beginning that pulls you in. It's the reason TED Talks don't include the host's introduction, and the reason why TED generally cuts out the speakers own opening remarks. Online viewers are incredibly vulnerable to distraction; you have to grab and hold their attention. So it's a great investment for speakers to craft the first minute of their talks, and use it as an opportunity to frame the rest of the talk for the audience. It can make the difference between having their rapt attention or ... not.

It's Authentic

There are many more things to be said about what makes a great TEDx Talk, but just one more thought to leave with you: Authenticity. At the end of the day, a talk has to be authentic to the speaker to succeed. There's no formula for a perfect TEDx talk. No short cut. No one winning strategy. What we're trying to do in every case is give each speaker the tools to offer their own authentic ideas in their own authentic voice.

Our Favorite Powerful TED Talks

'How Great Leaders Inspire Action' by Simon Sinek

https://www.ted.com/talks/simon_sinek_how_great_leaders_inspire_action

'How to Fix a Broken School? Lead Fearlessly, Love Hard' by Linda Cliatt-Wayman

https://www.ted.com/talks/linda_cliatt_wayman_how_to_fix_a_broken_school_lead_fearlessly_love_hard

'What Does my Headscarf Mean to You?' by Yassmin Abdel-Magied

https://www.ted.com/talks/yassmin_abdel_magied_what_does_my_headscarf_mean_to_you

'A Boat Carrying 500 Refugees Sunk at Sea. The Story of Two Survivors' by Melissa Fleming

https://www.ted.com/talks/melissa_fleming_a_boat_carrying_500_refugees_sunk_at_sea_the_story_of_two_survivors