

2018

TED Talks: What Makes Ideas Worth Spreading?

Madeline M. Rost
Augsburg University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://idun.augsburg.edu/papers>



Part of the [Mass Communication Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Rost, Madeline M., "TED Talks: What Makes Ideas Worth Spreading?" (2018). *Award Winning Papers*. 1.
<https://idun.augsburg.edu/papers/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate at Idun. It has been accepted for inclusion in Award Winning Papers by an authorized administrator of Idun. For more information, please contact bloomber@augsbu.edu.

TED Talks: What Makes Ideas Worth Spreading?

One of the most amazing things about humans is our ability to think. We can think about simple thoughts and ideas or more complex ones. And thanks to the power of communication (both verbal and nonverbal), we have the ability to share our thoughts and ideas with others. There are quite a number of people on our little blue planet, so there are a lot of ideas loosely floating around out there, but sadly not everyone has to chance to share their thoughts and ideas with others. Now what if there were a space in which passionate speakers could have an opportunity to share their thoughts and ideas? Luckily for the thinkers of the worlds, such a space exists.

In 1984, Richard Saul Wurman observed a confluence among three different fields: technology, entertainment, and design. The first ever TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) talk, co-founded by Harry Marks, included a demonstration of the compact disc (also popularly known as CDs), the e-book, state of the art 3D graphics from Lucasfilms, and Benoit Mandelbrot demonstrating how to map coastlines with his developing fractal geometry theory (“History of TED”, n.d.). However, the world was not ready for TED just yet.

The event ended up losing money and it took time for Wurman and Marks to try again. Fast forward to 1990. The world was now ready for TED. The TED Conference became an annual event in Monterey, California. The conference drew in a growing and influential audience from differing disciplines. Audience members were linked by their curiosity and open-mindedness (“History of TED”, n.d.). At these conferences, more than 50 talks are given over the course of a week. The subject of these talks includes the original fields of technology,

entertainment, and design, and has slowly expanded to include ideas from any discipline, all to explore how everything connects (“Conferences”, n.d.).

As time went on, the list of presenters expanded to include scientists, musicians, philosophers, religious leaders, and others. For those in attendance, TED became an intellectual highlight of the year, especially for media entrepreneur Chris Anderson. Meeting with Richard Saul Wurman in 2001 to talk about the conferences future, Chris Anderson made a deal that led to TED being acquired by his nonprofit Sapling Foundation. In making the conference nonprofit, Chris Anderson kept true to what made TED great: the format, the content, and the mission to seek out intriguing individuals and allow them an opportunity to share their thoughts and ideas with the world (“History of TED”, n.d.).

Soon it became clear that the ideas shared at TED could have an impact far outside of Monterey. The time between 2001 and 2007 saw big additions to TED. One being TEDGlobal, a sister conference held in locations through the world. The TEDPrize, which gives its winners one wish to change the world (“History of TED”, n.d.). And lastly, TED Talks, an audio and video podcast series that is able to accessed online for free. A number of program and initiatives followed throughout the years, including: TEDx, a program that helps independent organizers create TED-like events in their communities (“TEDx Program”, n.d.), TED Active, TED Fellows program, TEDMED, TED Translator, TED-Ed, and TED Radio Hour. In 2012, TED Talks celebrated the enormous milestone of having its one billionth video view. The website now has over 2600 talks for people to view and share with others (“History of TED”, n.d.).

Learning about the humble beginnings and the expansion of TED over time made me curious to learn more. For my research project, I decided to dive in and analyze what TED talk

videos do to persuade people to watch their talks, listen to the ideas presented in them, and share the videos with other, along with analyzing any patterns among TED talks.

Research Questions

I proposed eight research questions, four of which dealt with the technicalities of the videos and the other four dealing with more specific details of the speech.

RQ1: Will one year have produced more videos than other years?

RQ2: Will more speeches take place at official TED Talk events than unofficial TED Talk events?

RQ3: Will shorter speeches be more favored than longer speeches?

RQ4: Will speeches about technology, entertainment, and design (the speech topics TED was originally founded on) be more popular than other topics?

RQ5: Will a majority of the speakers use citing a paper, study, or survey to start their speech off and capture audience attention?

RQ6: Will more speakers move around the stage as they speak or will they be static?

RQ7: Will most speakers use physical, handheld notes during their speech?

RQ8: Will most speakers use a presentational aid during their speeches or forgo them?

Sample

To gather a sample of videos for my research project I went onto TEDs official website (www.ted.com) and started to browse through the +2600 videos available. I directed my attention to already compiled playlists in an effort to find a more concise sample size. I found a playlist titled “The most popular talks of all time” a playlist containing 25 videos. I decided to use this

playlist as my sample because 25 videos provided a large enough sample size without being too overwhelming and unwieldy, along with showcasing examples of tried-and-true TED talks.

Method

To help organize the data I found and answer my research questions, I created eight different categories that correlated with my research questions. The first category looked at what year the speeches were recorded, typically given in an informational section under each video. Years for this category ranged from 2004 (the earliest year found) to 2017 (the last full calendar year). The second category looked at event type, given again in the informational section, and was broken down into either official or unofficial TED events (all of which operate under license from TED Talk). The third category pertained to speech length, with possible time frames ranging from 0-10 minutes, 10-20 minutes, and 20+ minutes. The fourth category dealt with topic tags for the video. Appropriate topic tags for each video were again found in the provided informational section. After collecting all the topic tags used in the 25 videos, I put the combine total of 89 tags (videos can have multiple tags) into a word generator to properly sort out and see any frequencies among the tags. The fifth category looked at what techniques speakers used to start off their speech (audience engagement, personal anecdote, quotation/citation, explanation of what they will be talking about, or a combination of techniques). I designated the one minute mark to be the end of the start of the speech. The sixth category looked at the speaker's movement in the space they were given (static or fluid). Fluid movement was defined as taking more than 5 full steps in any given direction at a somewhat constant pace. The seventh category looked at speakers use of physical, handheld notes (notes or no notes). The eighth category dealt with presentational aid use (yes or no). This category had a subcategory of types of

presentational aids used (PowerPoint, prop, audience member(s) participation, poster board, video, or combination). For each TED Talk of my sample, I analyzed it through the scope of each of the eight categories created.

Analysis of Results

Now having the results of my data, I proceeded to answer my eight questions. The results of my findings were most expected, but some findings turned out to be a surprise.

RQ 1: Will one year have produced more videos than other years?

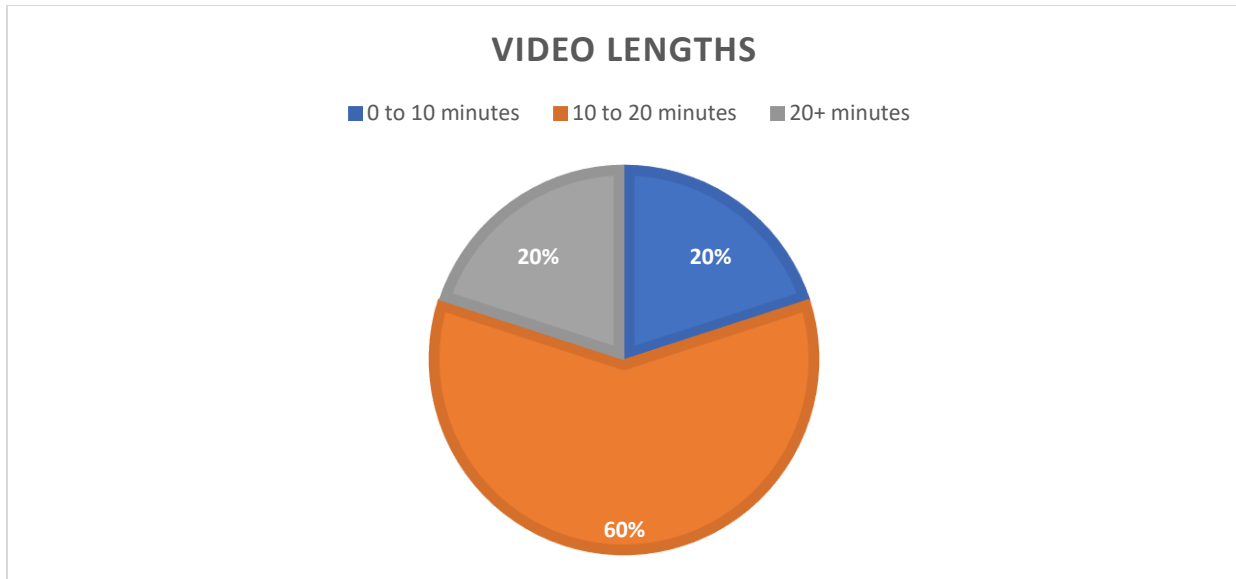
A: The first category looked at what years the videos of the most popular TED talks were recorded. Of the 25 videos: no videos originated from 2005, 2014, and 2017. The years 2007, 2008, 2010, and 2016 all saw one video being recorded. 2004, 2006, 2011, and 2015 saw two videos being recorded. And 2009 was the most popular year, with a total of seven videos being recorded. I was most surprised about how many more videos 2009 had recorded compared to the others.

RQ2: Will more speeches take place at official TED Talk events than unofficial TED Talk Event?

A: My second category looked at event type. 19 of the 25 talks were from official TED events, with the remaining six being from unofficial TED events. Of the unofficial events, five were TEDx events, and the other was a TEDMED event. This was not a surprising find at all, but it was nice to see that some of the most popular TED talks of all time were from independent organizations.

RQ3: Will shorter speeches be more favored than longer speeches?

A: My third category looked at speech lengths. I found that five videos were in the 0-10-minute bracket, 15 videos in the 10-20-minute bracket, and the last five were in the 20+ minutes bracket. I was surprised that people seemed to prefer more medium length speeches more than shorter ones.



RQ4: Will speeches about technology, entertainment, and design (the speech topics TED was originally founded on) be more popular than other topics?

A: The fourth category I dealt with looked at the topic of the speeches themselves. The most used topic tag was culture (11 uses), followed by psychology (eight uses), science (also eight uses), then brain (seven uses), and business (six uses). The rest of the topics uses are

summarized in the following chart:

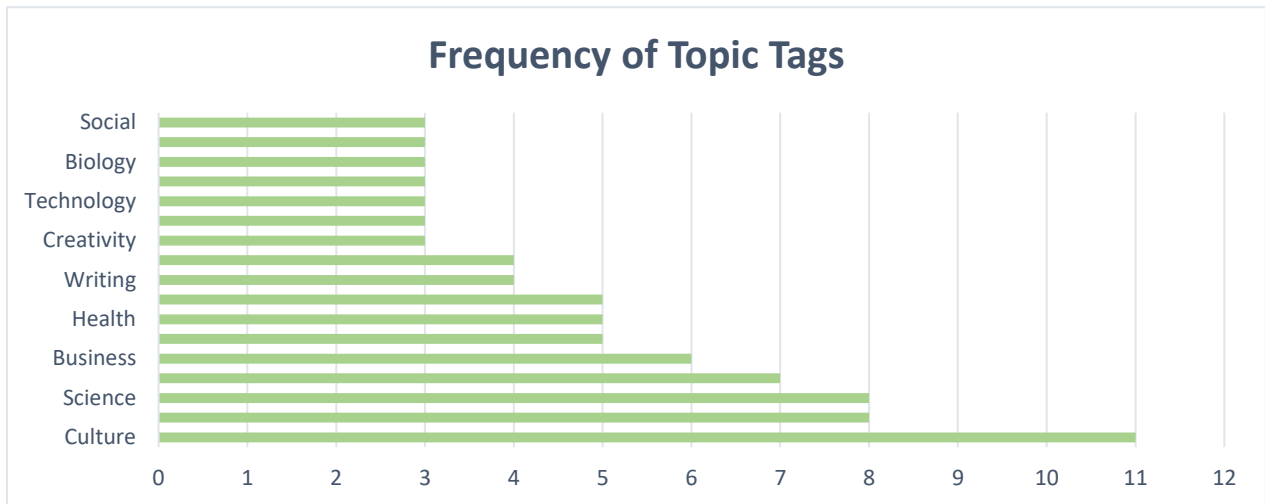


Table A summarizes topic tags that only had two uses, and Table B summarizes topics that were only used once.

Table A

Communication
 Goal-setting
 Productivity
 Depression
 Evolution
 Language
 Society
 Success
 Choice
 Comedy
 Mental
 Books
 Magic
 Body
 Mind
 Self
 Time

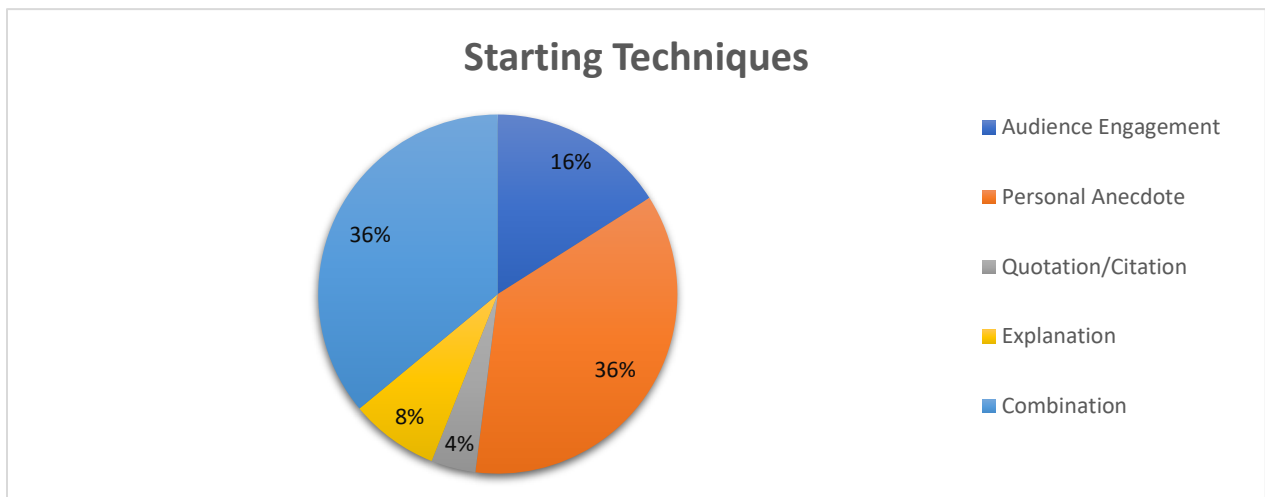
Table B

Decision-Making
 Visualizations
 Consciousness
 Relationships
 Entrepreneur
 Storytelling
 Exploration
 Open-source
 Performance
 Personality
 Photography
 Friendship
 Innovation
 Leadership
 Cognitive
 Curiosity
 Education
 Introvert
 Parenting
 Potential
 Sociology
 Work-life
 Children
 Humanity
 Identity
 Illusion
 Internet
 Medicine
 Teaching
 Animals
 Balance
 Fashion
 History
 Illness
 Africa
 Beauty
 Design
 Global
 Issues
 Marine
 Oceans
 Online
 Poetry
 Speech
 Aging
 Crime
 Dance
 Sound
 Video
 Data
 Demo
 Fear
 Fish
 Life
 Sex

I was actually surprised that the three speech topics that TED was originally founded on were not the most popular.

RQ5: Will a majority of the speakers use citing a paper, study, or survey to start their speech off and capture audience attention?

A: My fifth category pertained to what techniques speakers would use to start of their speeches. Audience engagement (chatting with them, asking direct questions, etc.) was used four times. Using a personal anecdote was used nine times. Quoting or citing a study, survey, etc. was used once. Simply explaining what their speech will be about was used twice. And a combination of the techniques was used nine times. I was surprised to see that personal anecdotes and the combination technique were the preferred method starting off a speech, rather than citing a paper, study, or survey.



RQ6: Will more speakers move around the stage as they speak or will they be static?

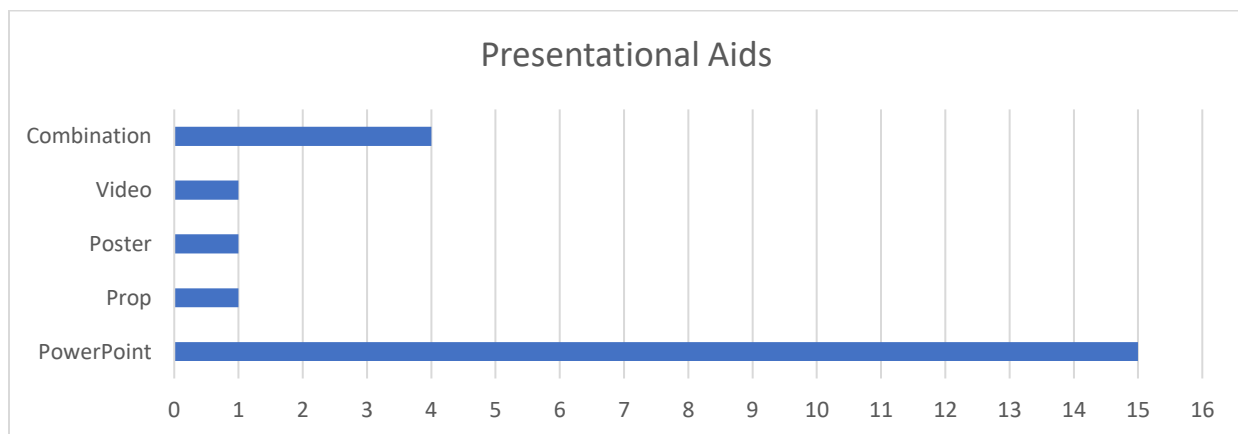
A: My sixth category looked at how the speakers utilized the space of the stage. It was found that 19 of the speakers were more fluid and moved around the stage, while the remaining six speakers were very static and did not move around at all.

RQ7: Will most speakers use physical, handheld notes during their speech?

A: My seventh category dealt with the uses of notes during the speeches. I found that only three speakers used notes, and the remaining 22 did not use notes at all. I was actually quite surprised about the number of speakers who chose to not use physical notes.

RQ8: Will most speakers use presentational aids during their speech or forgo them?

A: My eighth category looked at use of presentational aids. I found (just like use of notes), that only three speakers went without presentational aids, and 22 speakers used some form of presentational aid. Of the presentational aids used, 15 of the speakers used a PowerPoint, one speaker used only a prop, one speaker only used a video, and one speaker only used a poster. The remaining four speakers used a combination of presentational aids. Two speakers utilized both a prop and a PowerPoint, one speaker used both a PowerPoint and bringing up an audience member to participate, and the last speaker used audience participation and a video. I was not surprised by the overwhelming use of presentational aids. I was however, surprised that PowerPoints were the preferred choice of presentational aid, especially when compared to the other type of aids used.



Discussion

One of the hardest parts of my research was thinking of research questions to ask and answer. It took some time to think of questions that other people would be curious about and hopefully match up with what they look for in the TED talks they want to watch and share. That is why I decided to have half of my research questions deal with the technical side of the talks that may draw them in and the other half of my research questions deal with the inner details that will (hopefully) persuade people to continue watching and (again hopefully) share the talk with others. Instead of having such an even division of questions, I could've focused my questions either all on the technical aspects, or focused solely on the inner details of the TED talks.

Another hard part of my research was deciding on an appropriate sample for this project. The TED talk website (at this moment) has over 2600 talks available so there was a number of different sample pools that I could've used instead of the 25 most popular TED talks of all time that I eventually decided to use. Further research on TED talks could analyze videos pertaining to only one specific topic, or only analyze videos that were recorded in a specific year, or analyze videos only from official TED Talk events. The sample possibilities that can be used for research related to TED Talks are endless, especially considering the fact that new talks are uploaded each weekday.

I ran into some coding and categorizing issues, especially with the research questions/categories that dealt with the inner details of the videos. The hardest one to code and categorize was the techniques that speakers used to start their speeches. It took some time to create categories that would be exhaustive of all of the starting techniques found in the sample used. Placing videos into the correct category was tricky and required multiple re-watches of all

the TED talks used to ensure that I was truly was placing each video in the appropriate starting technique category. That is also why I set the end of the start of the speech at the one minute mark, just to ensure that I would have time go back and do multiple re-watches for each TED talk.

Another coding and categorizing issue I had was for the category of speaker movement. It took some time to figure out what the criteria for fluid movement would be. Once I figured that criterion out, it took (again) multiple re-watches of each TED talk to see if they were truly moving in a fluid fashion or were being very static.

Going along with the topic of coding, having either one other person or multiple people analyze TED talks with me could've easily changed the categories used, along with where each video was placed in the different coded categories. This in turn could've changed the results of the data analyzed.

Once I figured out my coding and categorizing issues and analyzed the rest of my data, I found it easy to structure and organize the results of my data analysis so that it would be quite simple to translate it all into a straight-forward and understandable research paper. I strived to make sure my writing was in-depth and detailed enough to give a clear picture of what I did through my research project, but also not so dense that potential readers would become bored while reading. I kept detailed writing in mind especially when completing the research questions, methodology, results, and analysis sections of the paper, as these are the most important sections of research papers.

It is important to note that the research done for this paper is not attempting to indicate any causation of what make TED talks so popular, as that would require a methodology suitable

for explanatory research, as opposed to this study, which is descriptive in nature. Rather, this research wanted to look more into patterns among TED talks, along with seeing what they do to persuade people to watch the talks, actively listen to the ideas presented, and share the talk (and the ideas in them) with other people.

References

Conferences. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.ted.com/about/conferences>

History of TED. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.ted.com/about/our-organization/history-of-ted>

TEDx program. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.ted.com/about/programs-initiatives/tedx-program>