

Blog

Insights From Our Office

10 tips on how to make slides that communicate your idea, from TED's in-house expert

📍 Posted by: [TED Staff](#) July 15, 2014 at 3:57 pm EDT





When your slides rock, your whole presentation pops to life. At TED2014, David Epstein created a clean, informative slide deck to support his talk on the changing bodies of athletes. Photo: James Duncan Davidson/TED

Aaron Weyenberg is the master of slide decks. Our UX Lead creates Keynote presentations that are both slick and charming—the kind that pull you in and keep you captivated, but in an understated way that helps you focus on what’s actually being said. He does this for his own presentations and for lots of other folks in the office. Yes, his coworkers ask him to design their slides, because he’s just that good.

We asked Aaron to bottle his Keynote mojo so that others could benefit from it. Here, 10 tips for making an effective slide deck, split into two parts: the big, overarching goals, and the little tips and tricks that make your presentation sing.



Aaron used this image of a New Zealand disaster to kick off a slide deck from TED's tech team — all about how they prepares for worst-case scenarios. He asked for permission to use the image, and credited the photographer, Blair Harkness. View the whole slidedeck from this presentation.

The big picture...

1. **Think about your slides *last*.** Building your slides should be the tail end of developing your presentation. Think about your main message, structure its supporting points, practice it and time it—and then start thinking about your slides. The presentation needs to stand on its own; the slides are just something you layer over it to enhance the listener experience. Too often, I see slide decks that feel more like presenter notes, but I think it's far more effective when the slides are for the audience to give them a visual experience that adds to the words.
2. **Create a consistent look and feel.** In a good slide deck, each slide feels like part of the same story. That means using the same or related typography, colors and imagery across all your slides. Using pre-built master slides can be a good way to do that, but it can feel restrictive and lead to me-too decks. I like to create a few slides to hold sample graphic elements and type, then copy what I need from those slides as I go.
3. **Think about topic transitions.** It can be easy to go too far in the direction of consistency, though. You don't want each slide to look exactly the same. I like to create one style for the slides that are the meat of what I'm saying, and then another style for the transitions between topics. For example, if my general slides have a dark background with light text, I'll try transition slides that have a light background with dark text. That way they feel like part of the same family, but the presentation has texture—and the audience gets a visual cue that we're moving onto a new topic.
4. **With text, less is almost always more.** One thing to avoid—slides with a lot of text, especially if it's a repeat of what you're saying out loud. It's like if you give a paper handout in a meeting—everyone's head goes down and they read, rather than staying heads-up and listening. If there are a lot of words on your slide, you're asking your audience to split their attention between what they're reading and what they're hearing. That's really hard for a brain to do, and it compromises the effectiveness of both your slide text and your spoken words. If you can't avoid having text-y slides, try to progressively reveal text (like unveiling bullet points one by one) as you need it.

5. Use photos that enhance meaning. I love using simple, punchy photos in presentations, because they help what you're saying resonate in your audience's mind without pulling their attention from your spoken words. Look for photos that (1) speak strongly to the concept you're talking about and (2) aren't compositionally complex. Your photo could be a metaphor or something more literal, but it should be clear why the audience is looking at it, and why it's paired with what you're saying. For example, I recently used the image above—a photo of a container ship about to tip over (it eventually sank)—to lead off a co-worker's deck about failure preparation. And below is another example of a photo I used in a deck to talk about the launch of [the new TED.com](#). The point I was making was that a launch isn't the end of a project—it's the beginning of something new. We'll learn, adapt, change and grow.



Here, a lovely image from a slidedeck Aaron created about the redesign of TED.com. View the whole deck from this presentation.

And now some tactical tips...

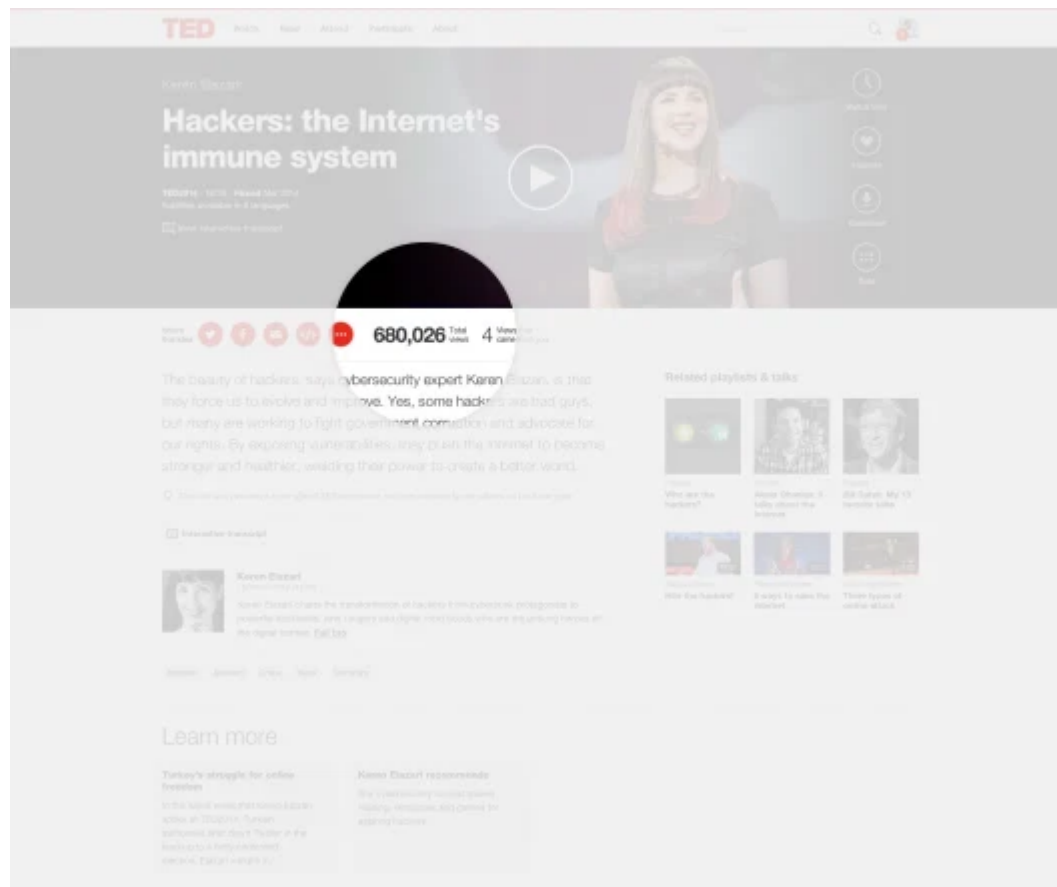
1. **Go easy on the effects and transitions.** Keynote and Powerpoint come with a lot of effects and transitions. In my opinion, most of these don't do much to enhance the audience experience. At worst, they subtly suggest that the content of your slides is so uninteresting that a page flip or droplet transition will snap the audience out of

their lethargy. If you must use them, use the most subtle ones, and keep it consistent.

2. **Use masking to direct attention in images.** If you want to point something out in a photo, you could use a big arrow. Or you could do what I call a dupe-and-mask. I do this a lot when showing new page designs, particularly when I don't want the audience to see the whole design until I'm finished talking about individual components of it. Here's the original image.



Here's the process for masking it. (1) Set the image transparency to something less than 100. (2) Duplicate that image so there is one directly over the top of the other. (3) Set the dup'd image transparency back to 100. and (4) **Follow the technique here** to mask the dup'd image. You'll end up with something that looks like this.

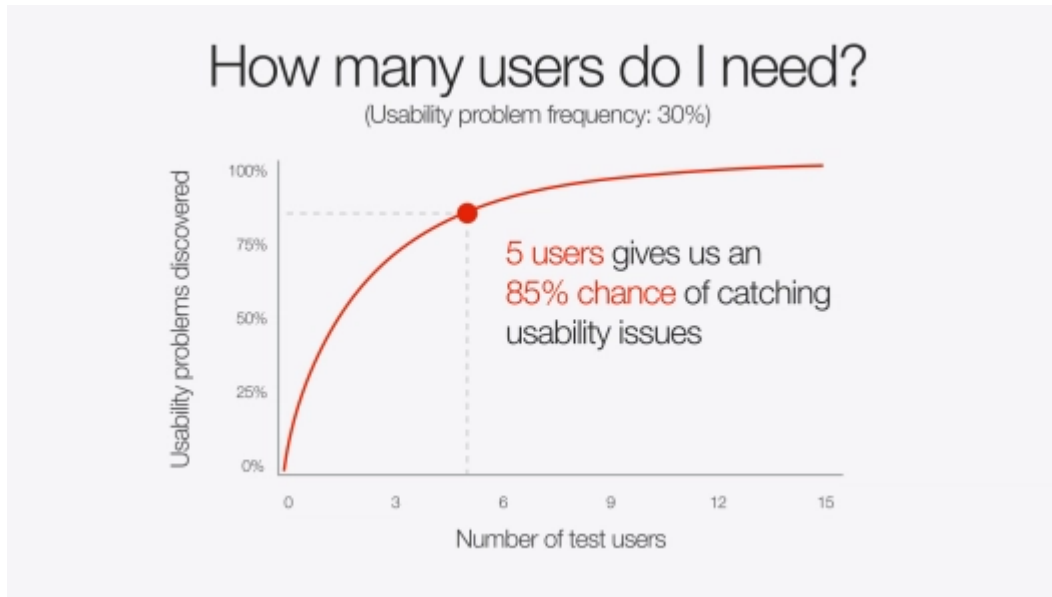


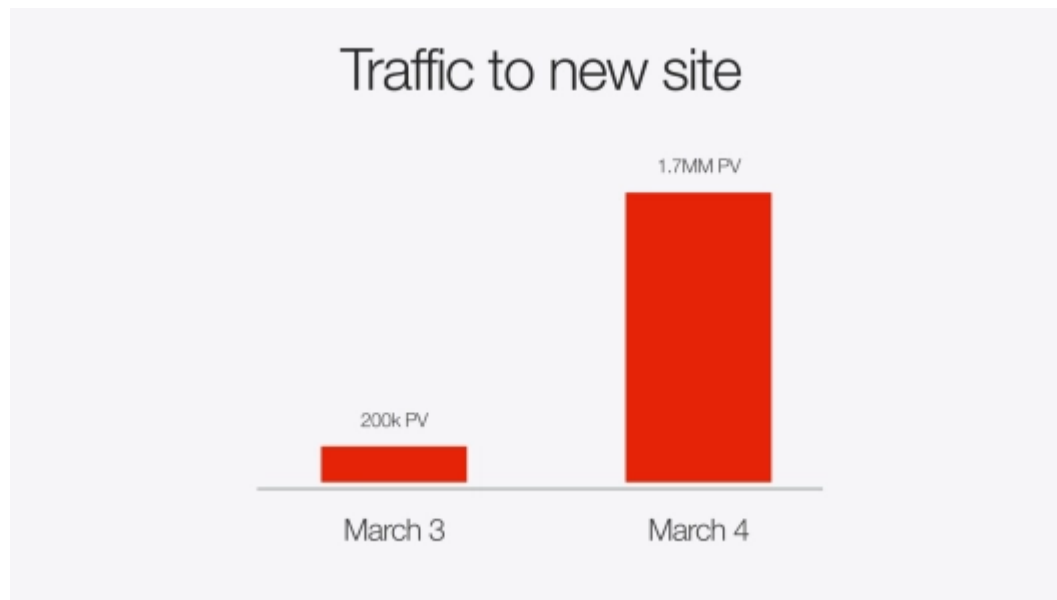
You can use this technique to call out anything you want in a screenshot. A single word, a photo, a section of content—whatever you want your audience to focus on.

3. **Try panning large images.** Often, I want to show screen shot of an entire web page in my presentations. There's a great [Chrome extension](#) to capture these—but these images are oftentimes much longer than the canvas size of the presentation. Rather than scaling the image to an illegible size, or cropping it, you can pan it vertically as you talk about it. In Keynote, this is done with a Move effect, which you can apply from an object's action panel.
4. **For video, don't use autoplay.** It's super easy to insert video in Keynote and Powerpoint—you just drag a Quicktime file onto the slide. And when you advance the deck to the slide with the video that autoplays,

sometimes it can take a moment for the machine to actually start playing it. So often I've seen presenters click again in an attempt to start the video during this delay, causing the deck to go to the next slide. Instead, set the video to click to play. That way you have more predictable control over the video start time, and even select a poster frame to show before starting.

5. **Reproduce simple charts and graphs.** Dropping an image of a chart into a presentation is fine, but it almost always disrupts the feel of a deck in unsightly fashion. If the graph data is simple enough (and you have some extra time) there's a way to make it much more easy on the eyes. You could redraw it in the native presentation application. That sounds like needless work, and it might be for your purposes, but it can really make your presentation feel consistent and thought-through, of one flavor from soup to nuts. You'll have control over colors, typography, and more. Here are some examples.





Lastly, I'd love to leave you with a couple book recommendations. The first is **Resonate**, by Nancy Duarte. It's not so much about slides, but about public speaking in general – which is the foundation for any presentation, regardless of how great your slides are. In it, she breaks down the anatomy of what makes a great presentation, how to establish a central message and structure your talk, and more. (One of her case studies comes from **Benjamin Zander's charming TED Talk** about classical music, a talk that captivated the audience from start to finish.) Think of this as prerequisite reading for my second recommendation, also by Duarte: **Slide:ology**. This is more focused on presentation visuals and slides.

Happy slide-making.





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By TED Staff on May 12, 2014

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Why TED is “cleaning” every single one of our video files — all 1,700 of them

By Gwen Schroeder on Jun 16, 2014

When you watch a TED Talk, you see a speaker on a stage sharing a big idea. But for us in TED’s post-production department, we see each talk as the final product of a complex recipe. The speaker and their words are the most important ingredient, of course. But there are other, less-obvious ingredients in [...]



Comments (57)

J P commented on Aug 26 2014

Very helpful!
Thanks for sharing the tips!

Presentation slides and duration should be in sync. Always, less text is preferred on slide, so, Presenter connects with audience through key notes and convey the burning issue!

Michael Ruhe commented on Aug 13 2014

I once joined a lecture of a at those day 60 years old sociologist – Peter Gross – who talked about his book “The multi optional society” and he started his talk with the words “...does he have a powerpoint or something to say?” and then he did a fabulous and thrilling presentation by words and on a flip chart.

Ever since then I have this sentence in mind, when I do my presentations and ask myself if my audience really needs to see slides. But if I ever decide to do a slide show with ppt or key, the hints in this article are of great help!

Thank you!



georgeobserves commented on Aug 9 2014

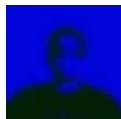
Reblogged this on [georgeobserves](#) and commented:

First who is your audience.....do some bit of customization of your personal style..bit....because you dont want to conform too much and neither do you want to lose them on slide 1. Based on point 1, figure out the big message and the elements that make up the big message which should be, what...why...how..thats sounds like

inane advice, but the reality is that quite often we have a burning issue in our head that we want to shout out to the world or we have no burning issue and just need to present. Its these times that we forget the inane what..why and how. Then often even when we remember it, it requires focus and skill to ensure that your ppt follows the what why how elements in whatever sequence. Once you have the elements on paper then get to making the deck....This reblog has some good tips on that. Same font....not too many colors, very less text.

casimaa88 commented on Aug 5 2014

Ok is so great presented problem <http://www.invest-center.com.pl>



ajiitabh commented on Aug 2 2014

Reblogged this on [Keep it simple](#) and commented:
interesting

Farzad Paridar commented on Jul 24 2014

Hope you don't mind contributing, any amount would do. Every dollar would be a huge help <https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/zolent-world-of-talents/x/8237794>



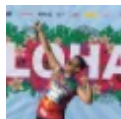
stephaniesilverman commented on Jul 21 2014

Reblogged this on <http://bit.ly/1hpeGmT>

I've just been covering these exact points and more with a group in Dallas. Great tips and reminders for moving away from the tired, old traditional approach. Please see

this article that goes even deeper into some of the challenges to creating a great

deck: <http://bit.ly/DontBlamePowerpoint>



Noo commented on Jul 21 2014

Reblogged this on [Noo2555's Blog](#).

Brendan Grady commented on Jul 20 2014

Reblogged this on [Analytics Ideas](#) and commented:

As a marketer of analytics software, I often find myself under a tremendous amount of pressure to create presentations which have WAY too much detail. This TED blog is a must read for any marketer or frankly anyone who needs to create presentations that convey meaning.

jennifer55723 commented on Jul 20 2014

Reblogged this on [jennifer55723's Blog](#).



stephaniesilverman commented on Jul 20 2014

Just returned from facilitating a presentation workshop where we covered these very points! So well articulated and demonstrated here. I plan to share a link to this in my blog: <http://bit.ly/1hpeGmT>

Certain industries fight these logical recommendations tooth and nail. I consider it my personal mission to break people free from the dull, language-heavy, reading aloud style that has become tradition in so many companies.

Really great information here – thanks so much for sharing it! I plan to direct clients here to support our work together.

Stephanie

<http://www.silvermanspeech.com>



arronsparks commented on Jul 19 2014

Reblogged this on [Down-Up](#) and commented:
Interesting stuff to think about



jibriw85 commented on Jul 19 2014

Nice post. My teacher discussed how to make slides that show how a person is thinking, this is right up my alley, great info,
[Thanks for sharing](#)



Webmasters Pride commented on Jul 18 2014

this is such an interesting story to read. thanks for commenting everyone.



hudatsuyoshi commented on Jul 18 2014

Reblogged this on [Huda-Tsuyoshi](#) and commented:
Right when I need it :)



louclarkgrav commented on Jul 17 2014

So, is there somewhere I can learn about the 1920's v 2012 shot putter?



Emily McManus commented on Jul 18 2014

Why yes you can! David Epstein's TED Talk is here, and it's really fun to watch:
http://www.ted.com/talks/david_epstein_are_athletes_really_getting_faster_better_stronger

Christine Fram commented on Jul 17 2014

Is it possible to watch his Ted talk?



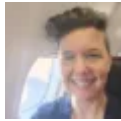
mdmontalban commented on Jul 16 2014

Reblogged this on [Creativity, Innovation, Talent & Leadership](#).



Macrocompassion commented on Jul 16 2014

The picture “Preparing to Fail” has so many impossible things that are wrong with the (implied) dynamics, that it is unrealistic to a large degree. Many of your recommendations have been neglected here.



ngaioshort commented on Jul 18 2014

Macrocompassion, are you implying the picture has been shopped as it is too unrealistic? It is from an accident off the coast of NZ.



Macrocompassion commented on Jul 18 2014

Indeed I am claiming that the picture has been faked. The displacements of the containers on the ship is not how such a dynamic occurrence could take place. As an engineer with some knowledge and experience in such things, I know better.



Emily McManus commented on Jul 18 2014

Hi Macrocompassion — it's hard to believe, I know! But this indeed happened. Google “Rena Monrovia disaster” to learn more, including film and more photos from different angles.



Michael McWatters commented on Jul 18 2014

It is quite an amazing shot, and here is some video of the actual footage:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qa7v7jqf6xg>

At about 1:45 in, you can see the position of the ship roughly as it is in the photo in the slide deck:



Macrocompassion commented on Jul 19 2014

Alright, I was wrong. That video footage is obviously authentic and very dynamic—the ship appears to be splitting in half on one side. Did it?

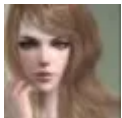


liamjkennedy commented on May 4 2015

note to self... if ever I feel like saying something like “As an engineer with some knowledge and experience in such things, I know better”... please let me think better of it before I make myself look like an

That being said.. when I saw the photo it did bring up a bunch of questions about how cargo ships / containers are stacked such that it's even possible for them to somehow hang together like this. Pretty impressive engineering if you ask me.

That being said.. and not to divert the conversation away from the topic further. Thanks for posting the article. Very useful tips.



ksfinblog commented on Jul 15 2014

Reblogged this on [KSFINBLOG : Global Analyst](#) and commented:
Some very good tips for those who present stuff....

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1 2 3

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