

# Analyzing Podcasts and TEDTalks: Structures, Rhetorics and Strategies



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# Workshop Agenda

- Overview of TEDTalk and Podcast structure
- Case Studies
- Rhetorical Strategies
- Critical Questions and Context



# Objectives

- Understand TEDTalk and podcast anatomy and devices
- Critical analysis of structural and stylistic conventions
- Identify areas of potential exploration, development, or change



# What are TEDTalks?

TED is a nonprofit media organization that delivers **free, short, self-contained talks** online on a variety of subjects in 18 minutes or less.

TED began in 1984 as a conference for Technology, Entertainment, and Design in Silicon Valley, and today covers a wide range of topics including education, business, science, tech and creativity. Speakers from these different fields try to present their ideas in **innovative and engaging ways**, primarily with a **storytelling** format.



# General Structure of TEDTalks

TEDTalks are similar to traditional conference presentations, but rely heavily on **oral storytelling techniques** and prioritize the use of **everyday language** to make research findings more **accessible to wider audiences**.

Generally, TEDTalks follow a **narrative arc**, with a clear introduction, middle, and end. Popular TEDTalk structures tend to look something like this:

**Intro:** Informal, Personal, and/or Interactive Introduction to the Research

**Middle:** Questions, Struggles, and Complications in the Research

**Conclusion:** Research Findings, Resolutions, and Takeaways (The “Bigger Picture”)



# Case Study: “The Power of Vulnerability”

Today, we’re going to watch and analyze Brene Brown’s “[The Power of Vulnerability](#),” one of the most popular TEDTalks to date.

Questions to consider while watching:

- How does the speaker establish credibility during the talk?
- How does her body language (eye contact, hand gestures, posture) further convey her meaning?
- How does the speaker utilize the physical space?
- How do visual components influence how you process the information?
- How does the speaker establish and maintain relatability?
- How does the speaker’s verbal rhetoric engage the viewer?



# Case Study: “The Power of Vulnerability”

Brene Brown, “[The Power of Vulnerability](#)”



# Case Study: “The Power of Vulnerability”

Brene Brown’s talk is one of the most popular TEDTalks because it utilizes many elements we now associate with a “successful” TEDTalk:

- Relatable, **conversational** style and **narrative arc** that is key to the **storytelling** rhetoric of TEDTalks.
- **Vernacular** language, **humor**, and strategic pauses for **dramatic effect**
- The speaker utilizes her **physical space** and her visuals provide succinct **signposting** without becoming distracting
- The speaker shares her personal connection to her research and uses collective pronouns such as “**we**,” “**our**,” and “**us**” to trigger empathy and **engagement** with her audience.





# Additional Factors to Consider

While TEDTalks brand themselves as being approachable, accessible, and conversational, TEDTalks are **heavily scripted** and have **strict guidelines** about who can speak. Questions or comments after the talk are **not permitted**.

Though TED grants free, limited licenses for local TEDx events to occur all over the world, these licenses are **binding legal contracts** with strict rules about how the TED logo can be used, how TEDx events are named, how stages should look, how videos are produced, and which topics are allowed.

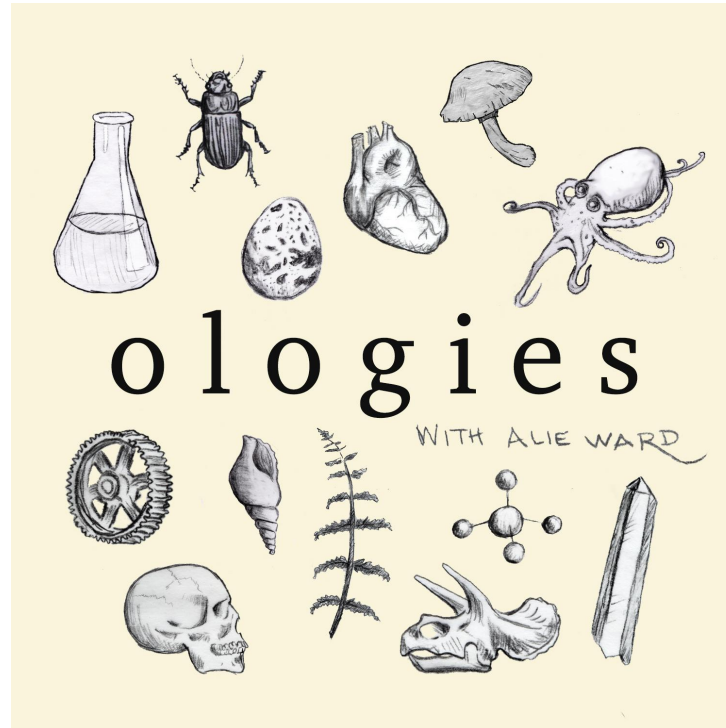


# Additional Factors to Consider (cont'd.)

- TED is currently curated by **one person**: Chris Anderson, a British-American businessman.
- The price of attendance for the annual in-person TED Conference is **ten thousand dollars** per person
- **Corporate sponsorships** for TED include Google, Coca-Cola, and Goldman Sachs
- Talks given by academics or professors at established universities in STEM-adjacent fields tend to be watched more than talks on art or design



# Next Up: Podcasts!



# What are Podcasts?

Podcasts are **digital audio programs** similar to radio talk shows, streamed or downloaded on the internet. Podcasts typically consist of **multiple episodes**, with each episode focusing on a specific topic, concept, or narrative moment within the podcast's **larger theme**.

Podcasts can be produced by **anyone** on **any topic**. Typical producers include historians, scientists, journalists, media organizations, and “regular” individuals. Podcasts can be a talk given by **one speaker** or a **discussion** between multiple speakers. The length and format of podcast episodes **vary widely**, and can be short segments or several hours long.



# General Podcast Structure

There are **no set “rules”** governing podcast structure, but podcasts typically begin with an **opening segment** of 10–30 seconds of music and audio wherein the creator identifies the **podcast title, host, and episode topic**—this creates an auditory trademark/signature, and indicates to the listener that the podcast is about to begin.

Podcast episodes typically last anywhere from about fifteen minutes to an hour, and can consist of **interviews, topical overviews, narrative storytelling, questions from listeners**, and more. Though podcasts generally sound **conversational** to maintain a rapport with listeners, episodes are typically **scripted to some degree**.



# Podcast Structure (cont'd)

With no visual component, podcasts have to rely completely on **auditory cues** in order to get their point across. After podcasts are recorded, music, sound effects, and audio clips are all strategically edited in to evoke certain **feelings and responses** in listeners, and to **prevent listener fatigue**. Some podcasts feature built-in intermissions or commercial breaks.

Podcast hosts often incorporate **humor**, personal **anecdotes**, narrative **cliffhangers**, or **direct engagement with listeners** to keep audiences invested over time.

Popular podcasts generally end with a spoken “**credits**” section, in which producers, guests, researchers, and sources are all attributed and cited.



# Case Study: *Ologies*

Listen to a segment of [“Scorpiology”](#) (through 12:32) from Alie Ward’s *Ologies* podcast. Questions to consider while listening:

- How does the host encourage continued listener investment?
- How does the host’s verbal style create anticipation and “hook” the audience?
- How does the host engage with advertisements? What kinds of rhetorical tools do they use to make the ads more appealing?
- What sorts of feelings/impressions do the theme music and sound effects evoke?
- How does the conversational format influence your listening experience?



# Case Study: *Ologies*

Alie Ward's *Ologies* is popular with a variety of listeners because:

- Informal, **conversational** style creates a sense of rapport with listeners of all backgrounds
- **Humor**, narrative **asides**, and **audio clips** keep listeners engaged by varying the structure of the conversation
- The host creates a sense of **community** by directly engaging with audience **questions** and **comments**
- The host builds **anticipation** (even through “dry facts” and advertisements) with delayed punchlines and “sneak peeks”





# Additional Factors to Consider

- Due to the **sheer volume** of podcasts available, it can be very difficult for podcasts to gain an audience
- The **price of production** for “professional-sounding” podcasts (technology, software, promotion, labor) can be **prohibitively expensive** without advertisements or corporate sponsorships
- Podcasts have to follow detailed protocols for **copyright and fair use**
- Because podcasts are edited in **post-production**, interview materials can be edited, redacted, or otherwise misrepresented



# Exit Questions

- Do podcasts and TEDTalks attract different kinds of speakers, audiences, and topics?
- What are the advantages of delivering information verbally through a podcast or a TEDTalk (as opposed to a written format)? Why might you pick one over the other?
- How do the structural conventions and limitations of each influence how information is delivered? As ethical researchers, which structures would you keep, and what would you do differently?



# Thank you!

If you have any questions, contact us at:

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