

What is it about [TED talks](#) that has made them so successful, and what can the business speaker learn from them? A new book marking their 30th year, *Talk Like TED: The 9 Public-Speaking Secrets of the World's Top Minds* by [Carmine Gallo](#), promises to tell us.

“We are all in sales now,” writes the author. This is especially true of Mr Gallo, a corporate communication coach who uses a number of classic rhetorical tricks to sell himself. Enumeration – ticking off numbered points – is a way of making something that may be complex seem clear-cut, or something that is open-ended seem complete. Hence his claim that there are nine – not eight, 12 or 42 – tricks to public speaking. He stakes a claim to authority (what Aristotle called an ethos appeal): “I am in a unique position to analyse TED presentations.” He asserts, somewhat absurdly: “If you’ve been invited to give a TED talk, this book is your Bible. If you haven’t . . . this book is still among the most valuable books you’ll ever read.”

Well, perhaps. The nine aspects of effective communication he picks out are (I paraphrase):

- Be passionate about your topic
- Engage the audience by telling stories
- Treat your speech like a conversation
- Tell the audience something it doesn’t know
- Include a few jaw-droppers
- Use humour
- Keep it brief
- Engage all the senses by painting word-pictures
- Be authentic.

You might notice that some of these overlap. No matter. All of them are sensible. And none are secrets, unless you stretch the definition of “secret” to mean principles independently discovered by all TED speakers and used by Mr Gallo “for years to coach CEOs, entrepreneurs and leaders”.

I am particularly interested in Mr Gallo’s remarks about delivery – last of the classical tradition’s “five canons of rhetoric”. What TED talks have in common is that they are 18 minutes long and generally stripped-down in format: one person, a stage, perhaps some slides. Delivery is therefore vital. The Greeks called it *hypokrisis*, which is the same as the word for acting.

Mr Gallo affirms that the most successful TED speakers use body language to frame their points, and by practising in front of a camera learn to strip out unintentional gestures (jiggling, fiddling with cuffs and so forth). They also emphasise key phrases with changes of volume or intensity, or bracket them with pauses. And they find a sweet spot of about 190 words per minute. Acting skills, in other words.

Why 18 minutes? In the words of TED’s chief Chris Anderson, it is “long enough to be serious and short enough to hold people’s attention”. Units of speech that much longer create a “cognitive backlog” that makes it harder and

harder to digest new material. If you are presenting for longer, therefore, it is wise to break your speech down into 10-minute or quarter-hour units and build in what Mr Gallo calls “soft breaks”, such as stories, videos and demonstrations.

Brevity applies, too, to slides. One of Mr Gallo’s interesting findings is that where “the average PowerPoint slide has 40 words . . . It’s nearly impossible to find one slide in a TED presentation that contains anywhere near 40 words”. One TED speaker mentioned – whose talk has had 7m downloads – was 25 slides in before she hit 40 words in total.

In short, you should be thinking not about how much you can deliver, but about how little your audience can take in. That’s a secret you can have for free.