# SPEAKERS ACADEMY WORKBOOK

#_prog-speakers-academy | #-speakers-academy-july2023-cohort

## Overview

The **Toptal Speakers Academy** is a 2-month program for speakers at all levels whether you want to become a better presenter in client meetings or be a speaker on world-renowned stages.

Use this workbook in tandem with the courses on Udemy and collaboration in your learning cohort channel (e.g. -speakers-academy-march2023-cohort). The Udemy courses are meant to be a learning resource, while this workbook will help you come up with a talk idea and prepare a presentation that you will be ready to deliver. This can be done self-paced, but we highly encourage you to complete the activities as prompted in the private cohort channel to make the most of peer feedback and have a presentation ready by the end of the program.

## Contents

**Go ahead and make a copy of this file to edit and keep. Let's get started!**

# MODULE 1

## Reflection

**What are 3 goals you have for taking this program?**

1.

2.

3.

**Why do you attend talks? Think about what motivates you to attend a speaker presentation. Which ones resonate with you the most and why do you think that is?**

## Start with an Idea

Whether you are planning to conduct a client presentation or present a talk at a conference, you need to have **one central idea** that you will communicate to your listeners. This needs to be something that they can hold on to, walk away with, value, or in some sense be changed by.

Anyone is capable of giving a powerful talk. The only thing that truly matters in public speaking is not confidence, stage presence, or smooth talking. It's having **something worth saying.**

**ASK YOURSELF**

- What are the issues that matter most in my field?

- How are they related?

- How can they be easily explained?

- What are the key controversies?

**IDEA INSPIRATION**

- What was the last idea you were excited about?

- Or angered by?

- What are two or three things you've done that you're very proud of?

- What is one idea or takeaway you'd like to spread most in people's minds?

A **bad** talk serves the speaker's goals, not the audience.
A **good** talk gives the audience what they came for.
A **great** talk gives them more than they expected.

# The Throughline

**What is a throughline:** the connecting theme that ties together each narrative element in your talk. Every talk should have one.

**You should be able to encapsulate your throughline in no more than 15 words**. And those 15 words need to provide robust content.

*What is the precise idea you want to build inside your listeners? What is their takeaway?*

**SAMPLE THROUGHLINES OF POPULAR TED TALKS**
- More choice actually makes us less happy.
- Vulnerability is something to be treasured, not hidden from.
- Terrible city flags can reveal surprising design secrets.
- A ski trek to the South Pole threatened my life and overturned my sense of purpose.
- Let's bring on a quiet revolution – a world redesigned for introverts.
- The combination of three simple technologies creates a mind-blowing sixth sense.

Source: *TED Talks: The Official TED Guide to Public Speaking*

## ACTIVITY #1: Find Your Talk Idea and Throughline

- ☐ In the space below, come up with a new talk idea.
- ☐ In the space below, write a throughline related to your talk idea in no more than 15 words.
- ☐ Share your idea and throughline in our private cohort channel. **Start the post with "ACTIVITY 1 - MY TALK IDEA"** so that it is clear to others.
- ☐ Provide feedback to 3 other people's ideas and throughlines. Note: it is proven that we learn well when assessing or teaching others, so let's grow together!

**TALK IDEA**

<br><br><br><br>

**THE CHECKLIST**

As you work on developing your throughline, consider the following:

☐ Is this a topic I'm passionate about?

☐ Does it inspire curiosity?

☐ Will it make a difference to the audience to have this knowledge?

☐ Is the information fresh, or is it already out there?

☐ Can I truly explain the topic in the time slot allocated, complete with necessary examples?

☐ Do I know enough about this to make a talk worth the audience's time?

☐ Do I have the credibility to take on this topic?

☐ What are the fifteen words that encapsulate my talk?

☐ Would those fifteen words persuade someone to be interested in hearing my talk?

Source: *TED Talks: The Official TED Guide to Public Speaking*

> *"**Talk about what you know.** Talk about what you know and love with all your heart. I want to hear about the subject that is most important to your life – not some random subject that you think will be a novelty. Bring me your well-worn passion of decades, not some fresh, radical gimmick, and trust me – I will be captivated."*
> *- Elizabeth Gilbert*

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# MODULE 2

## Know Your Audience

Having trouble figuring out your throughline? Then you may need to think deeper about who your audience is.

**ASK YOURSELF**

- Who is in the room with me?
- How knowledgeable are they?
- What do they care about?

- What do they need from me?
- What are their questions or expectations?
- How can I make the best use of their time?

**Envision the stage or meeting room for your talk idea. Who is in your audience?:**

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⭐ **Tip:** You can only gift an idea to minds that are ready to receive that type of idea.

## Throughline to Structure

Now that you have your talk idea and throughline, how do you structure your content and figure out what to say? You **start with your credibility**. Some of your credibility as a speaker comes from your credentials, your background, your expertise in a topic. But another aspect of **credibility comes from how logical, well-organized and well-reasoned your material is**.

**Here are a few ways you can structure your talk:**
- What? ➜ So What? ➜ Now What?
- Introduction ➜ Context ➜ Main Concepts ➜ Practical Implications ➜ Conclusion
- Situation ➜ Complication ➜ Resolution
- Situation ➜ Opportunity ➜ Resolution

ℹ️ **Resource:** *7 Ways to Structure Your Presentation to Keep Your Audience Wanting More*

## Build a Story Bank

> Stories are **22** times more memorable than facts alone.

Stories are a great way to build credibility. **A story bank is a collection of stories** that you're going to use again and again in the course of your life to get your point across. For those of you that are here to become a better speaker in client meetings, one of the most common types of stories in a story bank is your **client success stories that you can share with potential new clients** in order to show the impact that your services can have.

**To keep your story succinct and relevant, consider these four aspects as you think of a story:**
- What's a one or two sentence summary of the story?
- How does the story make people feel?
- What's the point of this story?
- What are one or two details that you're going to use to bring this story to life?

ℹ️ **Resource:** Udemy Course - Speak Like a Pro: Public Speaking for Professionals, Section 3 & 4

## ACTIVITY #2: Story for your Throughline

- ☐ In the space below, write down a story related to your throughline.
- ☐ Share your story in our private cohort channel and tell us how it supports your throughline. **Start the post with "ACTIVITY 2 - MY STORY"** and include or link to your previous post where you shared your talk idea/throughline so it's easy for others to find.
- ☐ Provide feedback to three other people's stories. Try to comment on whether their story supports their throughline.

### STORY RELATED TO YOUR THROUGHLINE

|  |
|--|
|  |

### BONUS ACTIVITY: BUILD YOUR STORY BANK

As other client success stories or prominent/impactful/memorable stories come to mind, jot them down below using this format so that you can refer back to them later to include in another talk. This will become your story bank that you can use over and over.

| One story I want to tell is… | This story makes listeners feel… | The point of this story is… | One detail I'll use to enliven this story is… |
|---|---|---|---|
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |

ℹ️ **Resource:** Udemy Course - Speak Like a Pro: Public Speaking for Professionals, Story Bank Handout

## ACTIVITY #3: Create Your Talk Outline

- ☐ Watch Section 3 of the Udemy course [Speak Like a Pro: Public Speaking for Professionals](#) [with Instructor Jennifer Hennings](#)
- ☐ Using Jennifer Henning's 'Power of 3' structure, construct an outline for your talk idea below.
- ☐ Share your completed outline in our private cohort channel. **Start the post with "ACTIVITY 3 - MY TALK OUTLINE"** and include or link to your previous post where you shared your talk idea/throughline so it's easy for others to find.
- ☐ Provide feedback to three other people's outlines. Do the main points and subpoints support their throughline? Do you think a different structure would work better for what they are trying to communicate?

### INTRODUCTION:

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### MAIN POINT #1:

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_____

**SUBPOINT 1A:** _____

**SUBPOINT 1B:** _____

**SUBPOINT 1C:** _____

### MAIN POINT #2:

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**SUBPOINT 2A:** _____

**SUBPOINT 2B:** _____

**SUBPOINT 2C:** _____

### MAIN POINT #3:

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> ***Brené Brown, one of the most popular TED speakers, has a simple formula:***
> *"Plan your talk. Then cut it by half. Once you've grieved the loss of half of your talk, cut it another 50 percent. It's seductive to think about how much you can fit into 18 minutes. The better question for me is,* ***'What can you unpack in a meaningful way in 18 minutes?'****"*

# MODULE 3

## Talk Tools

The following five categories are things every speaker should know and keep in their toolkit. Most talks do not fit exactly into any of the five categories. Instead, they'll typically incorporate different elements. These are merely tools to help you imagine how to best craft your talk. So select, mix, match, and augment the tools that work most powerfully and authentically for you and the idea you wish to share.

**CONNECTION: GET PERSONAL**

- **Make eye contact, right from the start.** This can be as simple as walking confidently on stage or in the room, looking around, making eye contact with a few people, and smiling.
  - Everybody looks good when they smile. 😃
- **Show vulnerability.** One of the best ways to disarm an audience is to first reveal your own vulnerability. If you feel yourself choking up, pause and take a sip of water, "Hang in there a moment… As you can see, I'm feeling a little nervous here. Normal service will be restored soon."
- **Make them laugh, but not squirm.** When you laugh with someone, you both feel you're on the same side. Laughter says, *'we as a group have bonded with this speaker.'*

Everyone then pays more attention - especially immediately after laughter, so choose your next phrase carefully.
- ○ Tell relevant anecdotes, build humor into your visuals, use satire, BUT DON'T use offensive language, sarcasm, humor based on religion, ethnicity, gender identity, or politics.
- ○ ℹ️ **Resource:** Udemy Course - [Hacking Public Speaking with David Nihill](#)
- **Park your ego.** Be yourself. E.g. if you're generally goofy, then be goofy.
- **Tell a story.** We're born to love stories. They are instant generators of interest, empathy, emotion, and intrigue.

## NARRATION: THE IRRESISTIBLE ALLURE OF STORIES

Stories resonate deeply in every human. By incorporating stories into your talk, you can greatly increase your connection with your listeners.

**Here are four key things to emphasize when sharing a story:**
- Base it on a character your audience can empathize with. "Let me introduce you to Sally..."
- Build tension, whether through curiosity, social intrigue, or actual danger.
- Offer the right level of detail. Too little and the story is not vivid. Too much and it gets bogged down.
- End with a satisfying resolution, whether funny, moving, or revealing.

## EXPLANATION: HOW TO EXPLAIN TOUGH CONCEPTS

**Explanation** is the act that consciously adds a new element to someone's mental model or reorders existing elements in a more satisfying way.

**When explaining something new:**
- Start with what your audience doesn't know.
- Introduce one concept at a time.
- Use examples to make each concept clear.
- Don't use acronyms/words/ideas your audience might not know.
- Go only as deep as you can without losing people's understanding.

ℹ️ **Resource:** Udemy Course - [How to tell a story with data with Mike X Cohen](#)

## PERSUASION: REASON CAN CHANGE MINDS FOREVER

**Persuasion** is the act of replacing someone's worldview with something better. And at its heart is the **power of reason**, capable of long-term impact. However, it's often not enough to build a well-reasoned and logical talk, you need to inject some energy to make your points come alive.

**Here's a few ways to make your points come alive:**
- Inject some humor early on.
- Add an anecdote.
- Offer vivid examples.
- Recruit third-party validation (referencing a well-known study or trusted thought leader).
- Use powerful visuals.

ℹ️ **Resource:** Udemy Course - [Presentation Skills: Give More Powerful, Memorable Talks with Joseph Liu](#)

## REVELATION: TAKE MY BREATH AWAY

What's the most direct way of communicating your idea to an audience? Simply *show* it to them. **Reveal** your work to the audience in a way that delights and inspires. There's an infinite variety of possible revelation talks, and the success depends on what is being revealed.

**Here's a few examples:**
- **The Wonder Walk:** based on the revelation of a succession of images or wonder moments. **Example:** [A robot that flies like a bird | Markus Fischer](#)
- **The Dynamic Demo:** show the audience a demo, but give them a hint of what they're about to see, *then* take them through the necessary context, ideally building toward a powerful climax, once the groundwork has been laid. **Example:** [How to control someone else's arm with your brain | Greg Gage](#)
- **The Dreamscape:** paint a bold picture of the alternative future you desire and do so in such a way that others will also desire that future. **Example:** [I Have a Dream speech by Martin Luther King Jr.](#)

Source: *TED Talks: The Official TED Guide to Public Speaking*

# World Class Visuals and Slides

The following guidelines apply mostly to speaking at conferences, but should be considered for client presentations as well.

**Don't read your slides word for word.**
- Your slides should share things your mouth can't explain so well: photographs, video, animations, key data.
- Consider having a word or phrase onscreen to remind people of the topic at hand.
- Even when a text slide is simple, it may be indirectly stealing your thunder. Slides should tease the audience's curiosity and make your words *more* interesting, not less.
  - Example: Instead of writing on a slide, "*A black hole is an object so massive that no light can escape from it,*" consider writing "*How black is a black hole?*"

**Don't** use the following items:
- Bullets.
- Dashes.
- Underlining and italics – they're too hard to read. Bold typefaces are OK.
- Drop shadows – use sparingly if necessary.
- Multiple type effects in the same line.
- Transitions and noise effects.

**Do** take the time to build aesthetically appealing slides.
- There are a lot of great graphic design resources out there these days if design is not your strong suit. Check out Canva and Gamma.
- Most photographs should be shown "full bleed," meaning that the image covers the entire screen.
- Use pictures with the highest resolution possible to avoid pixelation.
- Note: Most screens will use dimensions of 16:9.

ℹ️ **Resource: Toptal's Talent Presentation Template** (great for client presentations and presentations to the Toptal network).

**Do** keep your formatting simple.

| | |
|---|---|
| **Font Typeface** | One per presentation. Recommend medium-weight sans-serif fonts. At Toptal we use Proxima Nova. |
| **Font Size** | Use 24 pt or larger in most cases. Use *at most* three sizes throughout your presentation. |
| **Font Background** | If you're going to place text over a photo, make sure it is legible. |
| **Font Color** | Simple and high contrast, like black on white. |

**Do** give photo credit.
- If photos are all from one place, you can add one photo credit slide at the end.
- If you need to add credits to each photo, they should be positioned and styled consistently in a non-distracting way.
- Make sure you have a legal license to use any photos, videos, music, or special fonts.
- We recommend using royalty free sites for stock photos, such as Unsplash, Creative Commons, or Pixabay

Source: *TED Talks: The Official TED Guide to Public Speaking*

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**IMPORTANT: REVIEW IF YOU WILL BE REPRESENTING TOPTAL**
🟨 **Guidelines for Talent Representing Toptal at Events**

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## ACTIVITY #4: Build Your Presentation

- ☐ Review Udemy course [Presentation Skills: Give More Powerful, Memorable Talks with Instructor Joseph Liu](#)
- ☐ Now that you have your idea, outline, and tools for putting together world-class slides, it's time to build your presentation. **Create at least 5 slides**, incorporating some of the tips from this module, using the presentation platform of your choice. If you need a starting point, you can use [Toptal's Talent Presentation Template](#) on Google Slides.
- ☐ Share your presentation in our private cohort channel. **Start the post with "ACTIVITY 4 - MY PRESENTATION"** and include or link to your previous post where you shared your talk idea/throughline and outline so it's easy for others to find.
- ☐ Provide feedback to three other people's presentations based on the information from Module 3. Are the images appealing? Did they forget to credit a photo? Is the formatting simple?

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# MODULE 4

## I Want to be a Conference Speaker

Well done! You have found your talk idea, considered your throughline, based your outline around it, thought about supporting stories, and have started on a presentation deck. Now, you're ready to find a conference to speak at. In our final module, let's dive into Calls for Proposals (CFPs) and how to find a conference to speak at.

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### START NOW: SPEAK AT A TOPTAL TOPTALKS EVENT

TopTalks events are **designed to be a virtual practice stage** for Speakers Academy participants and graduates. TopTalks are a series of short presentations in under 10-minutes, hosted over Zoom, allowing you to practice presenting on any topic. This is a great goal for you to find your topic, create a title and talk abstract, work on slide design, and present to the Toptal community. As part of the experience, you'll receive feedback and guidance to help you implement everything you learned in the Speakers Academy on a safe and encouraging 'stage'.

**SIGN UP HERE**: https://topt.al/K7cjD2

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## What is a CfP?

A **CfP (Call for Proposals)** is an open invitation from conference organizers asking for session presentations.

**Also referred to as:** Call for Papers, Call for Speakers, or C4P.

Basically, this is what you need to look for so you can submit a proposal and let conference organizers know that you'd like to be considered to speak at their event.

**Be sure to research the conference before submitting a proposal:**
- What topics are they interested in?
- Who is the typical audience?
- Look up talks and videos from previous years.
- What is required in the CfP?
- What support do they provide to speakers?

Plan to search and apply for conferences **six months** ahead!

**CHECKLIST TO PLAN FOR YOUR PROPOSAL**
- ☐ A descriptive title that will make you stand out.
- ☐ Consider the knowledge level of your audience and what they expect to learn.
- ☐ You may not have your presentation finished before submitting a proposal, so make sure you can deliver on what you are proposing.
- ☐ If you will be showing a project or sample of code, ensure your project is in a good state to share.
- ☐ Your proposal is like a resume. Expect your reviewers to skim the proposal at first glance, and then read in more detail if they find it interesting.
- ☐ Show examples of previous speaking experience. If you don't have any, share any relevant experience: Meetups, leading workshops, teaching, or even **Toptal TopTalks**.
- ☐ Proofread your proposal! Ask a few friends in the industry, other speakers, or mentors to look over your proposal. When you join **Toptal's Speakers Network program**, this is a great place to ask for feedback.

ℹ️ **Resource:** The Ultimate Guide To Memorable Tech Talks — Part 3: Writing a Conference Proposal (or CFP)

## WHAT IS THE SPEAKERS NETWORK PROGRAM?

The Toptal Speakers Network program aims to coach, mentor, and provide support to those who wish to further their professional speaking career. As part of the program, speakers gain access to professional benefits such as a database of Call for Papers (CFPs) to easily access speaking opportunities, specialized workshops to continue to hone your skills, slide reviews and presentation design support, practice sessions to rehearse before a speaking engagement, and the opportunity to speak at Toptal-sponsored events.

**Is there a difference between a Talk Title and a Throughline?**
Sometimes they may be the same. If you recall, a **throughline is the connecting theme** that ties together each narrative element in your talk. It's often descriptive and sometimes a full sentence. Whereas a **title can be clever or funny**, shorter, and not often a full sentence.

**What is the difference between a Description and an Abstract?**
A **description focuses on what the audience will learn**, and is usually a short 1-2 paragraphs. You should always write one. This is what gets published on the event website and event program.

An **abstract focuses on what the speaker will do**, and may be multiple paragraphs. This is usually just for the organizers' use and you should write one for long talks or when requested.

| DESCRIPTION EXAMPLES | ABSTRACT EXAMPLES |
|---|---|
| *Street Fighting Data Science*<br><br>New analysts or engineers are often lost when textbook approaches fail on real world data. Drawing inspiration from problem solving techniques in mathematics and physics, we will walk through examples that illustrate how to come up with creative solutions and solve real world problems with data. | *Street Fighting Data Science*<br><br>Practical problem solving with data involves more than just visualization or applying the latest machine learning techniques. Intuition, domain knowledge, and reasonable approximations can mean the difference between a successful model and a catastrophic failure. We'll dive into some best practices I've extracted from solving real world problems like computing trending topics, finding related searches, cleaning election data, and ranking experts on social networks.<br><br>New analysts or engineers are often lost when textbook approaches fail on real world data. |

| | |
|---|---|
| | Drawing inspiration from problem solving techniques in mathematics and physics, we will walk through examples that illustrate how to come up with creative solutions and solve problems with big data.<br>● Creating Models<br>● Sampling & Approximation<br>● Finding Edge Cases<br>● Testing Extremes<br>● Working Backwards<br>● Joining to External Data & Crowdsourcing<br>● Turning Errors into Improvements |
| ***Designing Data Visualizations Workshop***<br><br>This workshop is a jumpstart lesson on how to get from a blank page and a pile of data to a useful data visualization. We'll focus on the design process, not specific tools. Bring your sample data and paper or a laptop; leave with new visualization ideas. | ***Designing Data Visualizations Workshop***<br><br>All attendees should bring paper and pen for quick sketching. Attendees should bring their own data to work with. Alternatively, they can download interesting data sets from sites such as infochimps.com, buzzdata.com, and data.gov. People with access to a windows machine might want to install Tableau Public.<br><br>We will discuss how to figure out what story to tell, select the right data, and pick appropriate layout and encodings. The goal is to learn how to create a visualization that conveys appropriate knowledge to a specific audience (which may include the designer).<br><br>We'll briefly discuss tools, including pencil and paper. No prior technology or graphic design experience is necessary. An awareness of some basic user-centered design concepts will be helpful.<br><br>Understanding of your specific data or data types will help immensely. Please do bring data sets to play with. |

## ACTIVITY #5: Research Conferences

- ☐ Research upcoming conferences or search CFP Aggregators like Confs.tech or PaperCall and **find 3 events** you want to apply for.
- ☐ Go to our private cohort channel and share 3 events you want to apply for. **Start the post with "ACTIVITY 5 - CONFERENCE LIST".**
- ☐ Sign up to speak at a TopTalks event. It's a great way to practice and upon completion, you will be eligible to join the Toptal Speakers Network program with many more benefits to grow your professional speaking career. One of those benefits is a CFP Database.

⭐ **BONUS CONTENT: Watch Toptaler Dave Aronson's Introduction to Toptal's CFPs Database**

**Good things** take time. You won't become an expert overnight. Remember to be patient with your speaking progress.