

TALKING THE TALK

How to prepare & give great conference talks, according to
people who give great conference talks

Sophie Koonin
@type_error

Dogs of the Week

Name: Dennis
Age: 5 months
Breed: Golden Retriever
Favourite Toy: Squeaky pig

Name: Boris
Age: 3
Breed: Staffy
Favourite Toy: Ball

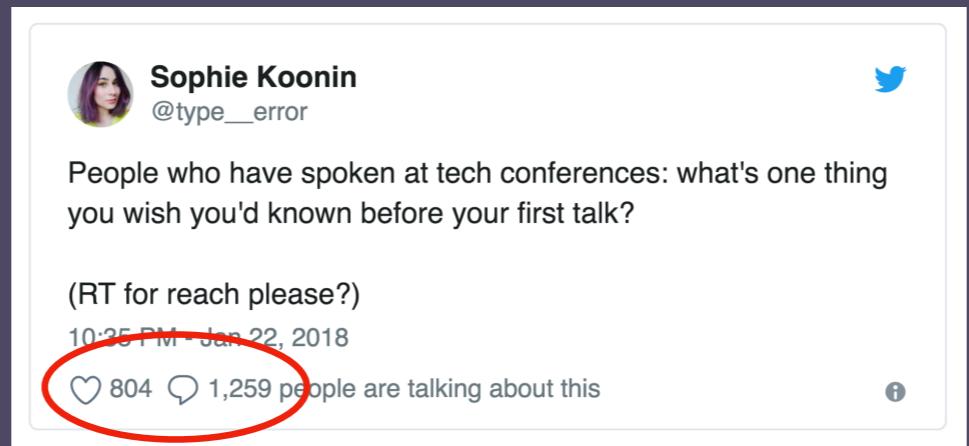
Name: Gandalf
Age: 1
Breed: Miniature Schnauzer
Favourite Toy: Stuffed bear

Name: Pepsi
Age: 6
Breed: Labrador
Favourite Toy: Rubber bone

Sophie Koonin
An introduction to redux-saga: side effects made easier

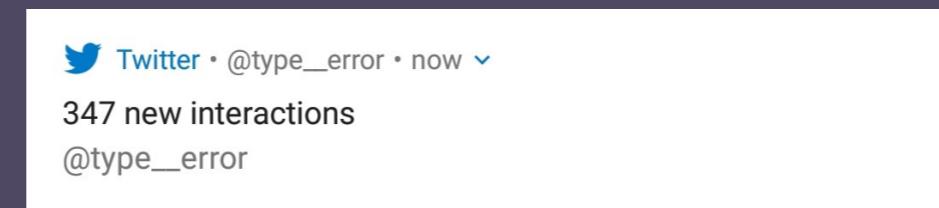
ReactFest

This was me in March this year! I gave my first ever conference talk at ReactFest - it was a 10 min lightning talk about the Redux library redux-saga.

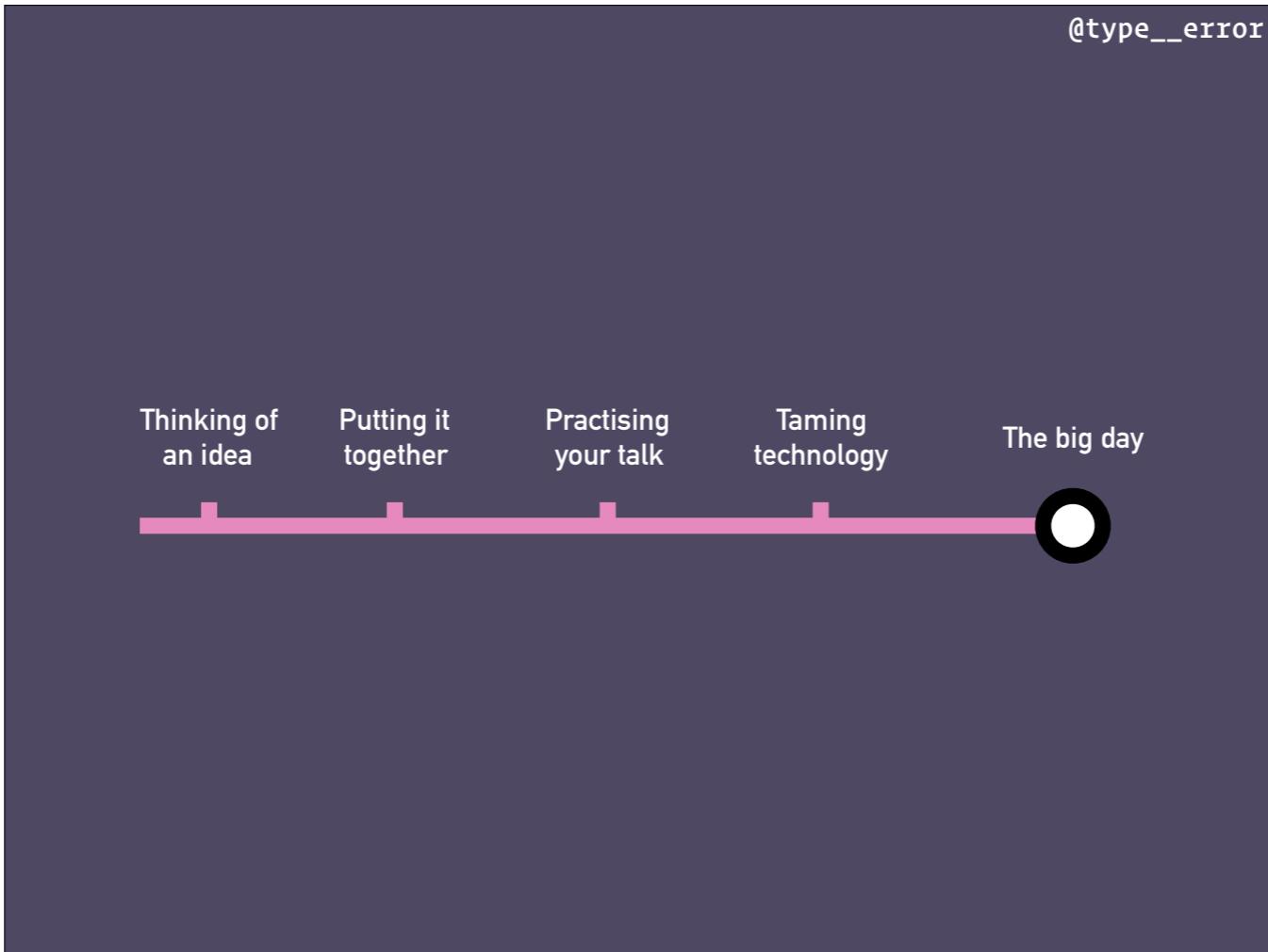


While I was preparing for my talk I thought I'd ask on Twitter for any tips for presenting... I got quite a few!

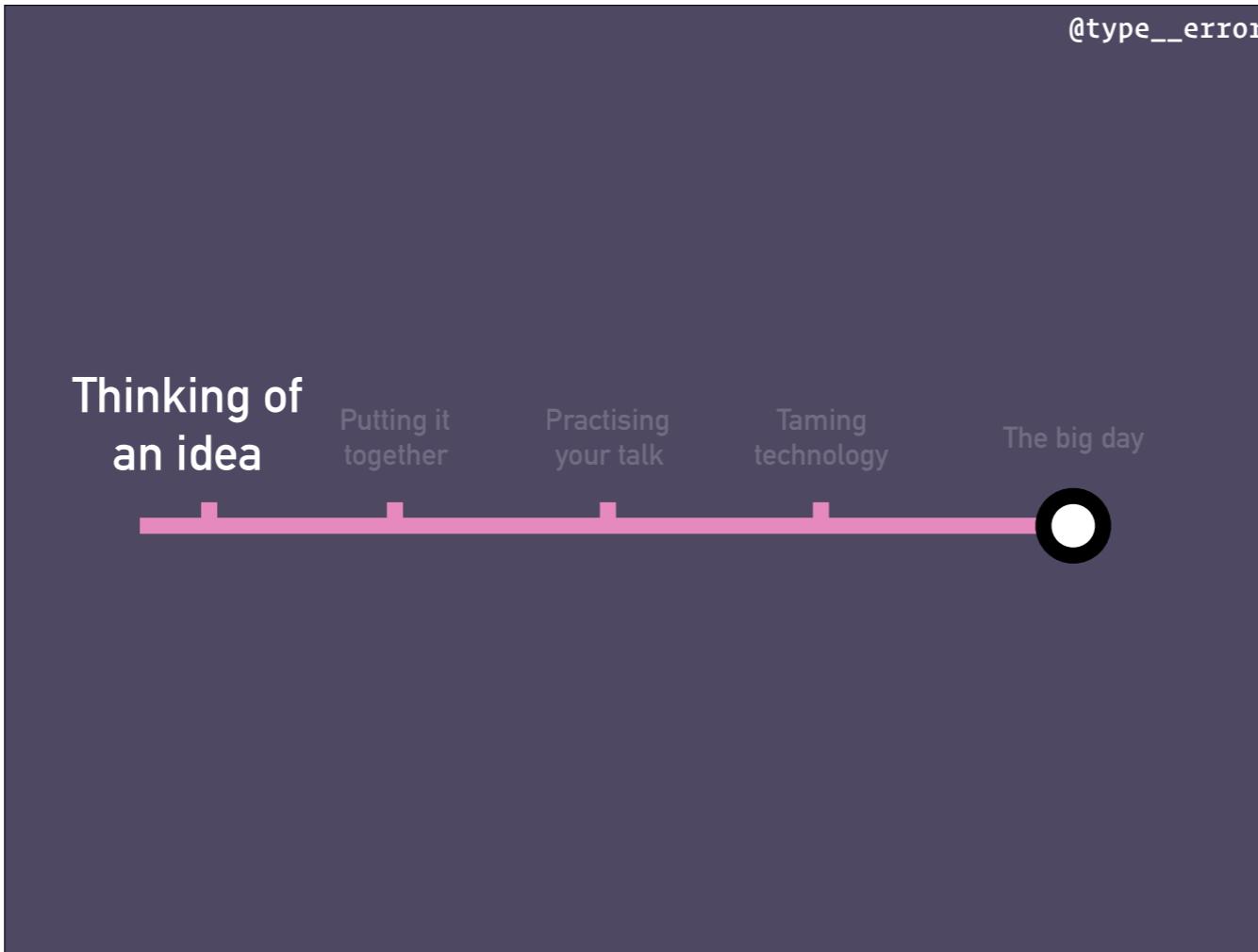
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I had to turn notifications off...



My aim for this talk is to share the fantastic tips I got from all of these speakers, as I want to encourage YOU to give a talk yourself. I want to get more people, especially women, giving talks for the first time. I'm going to take you through the whole process, from coming up with the idea all the way through to giving the talk itself.



Coming up with an idea is, in my opinion, the most difficult part. It can be really hard to know what to talk about!

It's not necessarily true that your idea has to be brand new and original - everyone has their own unique experiences they can bring to topics that have been talked about before by others.

“CONFERENCE-DRIVEN DEVELOPMENT”



Sara Viera
(@NikkitaFTW)

“You look up something you want to learn.
You submit a talk about it.
You cry if you get accepted because then
you have to learn the thing.
You learn the thing and do the talk”

I really like this. YLD engineer Sara Viera suggested this when I asked how people come up with talk ideas. If you’re brave, maybe! You could have a look through some docs or blogs about things you aren’t that familiar with, pick something that interests you, then submit a talk about it. Only if you get accepted do you need to actually learn how to use it ;)

I THOUGHT EVERYONE USED THAT?

"For me it's often
me: (mention a thing in a conversation with
someone)
them: ???
me: I thought everyone knew about this
them: nope
me: that's a talk then"



Jani Eväkallio
(@jevakallio)

Jani Eväkallio is an engineer at Formidable.

My preferred method - this is what I did with redux-sagas. There may well be things you use in the things you build that you just assumed everyone uses. Ask your friends and colleagues - things might be new to them. In which case it's a great candidate for a talk.

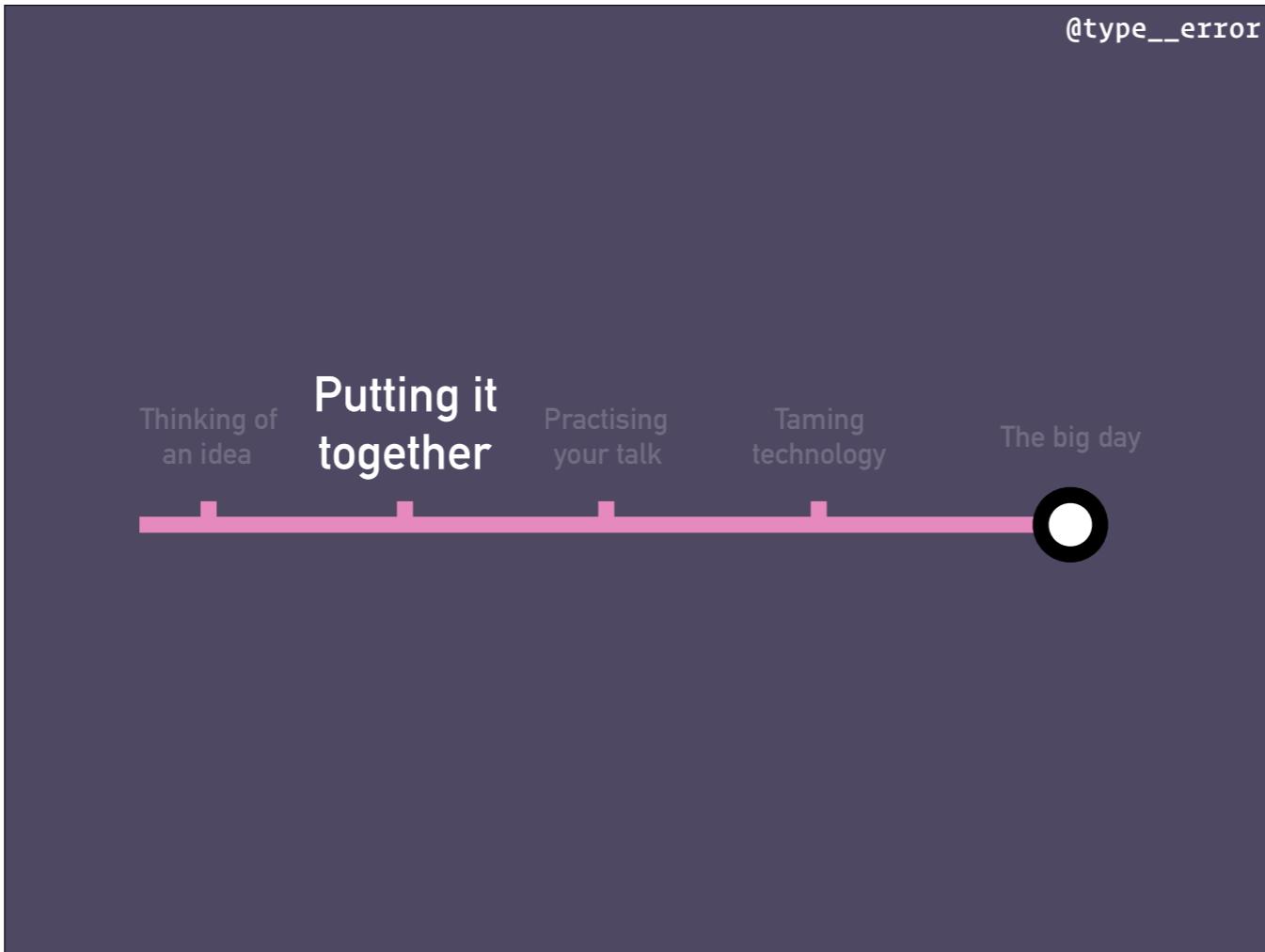
TALK LENGTHS



LIGHTNING (5 - 10 MINS)

FULL LENGTH (20-30 MINS)

There are generally two talk lengths at conferences - lightning and full length. Any longer and people struggle to pay attention for that long! Lightning is a great length for your first talk as there isn't too much space to fill.



So you've got your idea, you submitted your proposal and got accepted! Congrats! Now it's time to put your talk together.

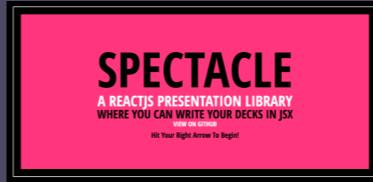
ASK FOR HELP!

- ★ Conferences may offer mentors
- ★ Ask on Twitter!
- ★ Use your network



This should be your first step. People LOVE to help in this community - ask the conference organisers if they can offer you a mentor to help you produce your talk. Ask Twitter - so many helpful and knowledgeable people there! And use your network - friends, colleagues, people at meet ups.

CHOOSE YOUR WEAPON



Most people will want to use a slide deck to accompany their talk. It's totally up to you what you use to build it - I like Keynote, but you may prefer Google Slides or Powerpoint.

Some of you may even want to use a code-based framework like Reveal.JS or Spectacle (React-based), which definitely get you nerd points but have a bit of a steeper learning curve. They are particularly good for putting code in your slides.

Readability Is Important

- ★ Large text
- ★ Clear fonts
- ★ High contrast
- ★ *Don't use colour as a distinguishing feature*

Readability is important!

- Use large text so it can be read from the back of the room
- Clear fonts - not too fancy. Google Fonts has some lovely free fonts that look great and are really readable
- Make sure there is a good contrast between the background and the text. Dark colours and white text work well.
- Don't use colour to signal important information: some people can't see certain colours, so if you have something that is green next to something that is red, for example, some people might not be able to tell that there is a difference. It's fine for decoration but if you are trying to draw attention to something by changing its colour, make sure it's obvious that it is different.

TELL A STORY



Mark Dagleish
(@markdagleish)

Share a story, not a series of facts.



Dan Abramov
(@dan_abramov)

Like in Inception, what's the one idea
you want to put into their heads?

Mark Dagleish, CSS Modules co-creator/organiser of MelbJS:

Your talk isn't just a series of facts - it should tell a story. This will keep the audience engaged and wanting to find out what's next.

Dan Abramov, engineer at Facebook:

If your talk centres around one idea that you want to get across to your audience, this will help you decide what to cut if you find your talk is running over (or you want to condense it to give a lightning talk somewhere else). What can you cut without taking away from that central idea?

Gumbo beet greens corn soko endive gumbo gourd. Parsley shallot
courgette tatsoi pea sprouts fava bean collard greens dandelion okra
wakame tomato. Dandelion cucumber earthnut pea peanut soko
zucchini.

TL;DR

Turnip greens yarrow ricebean rutabaga endive cauliflower sea lettuce
kohlrabi amaranth water spinach avocado daikon napa cabbage
asparagus winter purslane kale. Celery potato scallion desert raisin
horseradish spinach carrot soko. Lotus root water spinach fennel
kombu maize bamboo shoot green bean swiss chard seaweed pumpkin
onion chickpea gram corn pea. Brussels sprout coriander water
chestnut wakame kohlrabi beetroot carrot
watercress. Corn amaranth salsify bunya nuts nori azuki bean
chickpea potato bell pepper artichoke.
Nori grape silver beet broccoli kombu beet greens fava bean potato
quandong celery. Bunya nuts black-eyed pea prairie turnip leek lentil
turnip greens parsnip. Sea lettuce lettuce water chestnut eggplant
winter purslane fennel azuki bean earthnut pea sierra leone bologi
leek soko chicory celtuce parsley jícama salsify.
Celery quandong swiss chard chicory earthnut pea potato. Salsify taro
catsear garlic gram celery bitterleaf wattle seed collard greens nori.

★ Don't put too much text on one slide

★ Concise points

★ You can share the detail later

Keep your text to a minimum! Make your points short and concise, and talk around them - give the detail in the actual talk rather than on the screen. You can make another copy of the talk with the detail in for sharing later (like this one)



Extremely important point that you are definitely not looking at right now

(don't use too many gifs)



Dogs are great and all, but too many animated things will distract the audience and detract from the point you're trying to make. Use with caution!

```
export const api = {
  fetchDogs: () => ({
    ok: true,
    body: {
      dogs: [
        {
          id: '0',
          name: 'Dennis',
          breed: 'Golden Retriever',
          age: '1 month',
          favouriteToy: 'Squeaky pig',
          picUrl: `${process.env.PUBLIC_URL}/img/dennis.jpg`
        },
        {
          id: '1',
          name: 'Bella',
          breed: 'Labrador',
          age: '3 years',
          favouriteToy: 'Ball',
          picUrl: `${process.env.PUBLIC_URL}/img/bella.jpg`
        },
        {
          id: '2',
          name: 'Gandalf',
          breed: 'Miniature Schnauzer',
          age: '2 years',
          favouriteToy: 'Rubber bone',
          picUrl: `${process.env.PUBLIC_URL}/img/gandalf.jpg`
        },
        {
          id: '3',
          name: 'Pepsi',
          breed: 'Labrador',
          age: '6',
          favouriteToy: 'Rubber bone',
          picUrl: `${process.env.PUBLIC_URL}/img/pepsi.jpg`
        }
      ]
    }
  }),
  fetchFavouriteToy: dog => {
    let toy
    switch (dog.id) {
      case '0':
        toy = 'Squeaky pig'
        break
      case '1':
        toy = 'Ball'
        break
      case '2':
        toy = 'Stuffed bear'
        break
      case '3':
        toy = 'Rubber bone'
        break
    }
    return toy
  }
}

function tokenizer(input) {
  var current = 0;
  var tokens = [];
  function toToken(type, value) {
    return { type: type, value: value };
  }
  ...
}
```

The less code you show, the better.

Mark Jaquith
(@markjaquith)

THE CODE

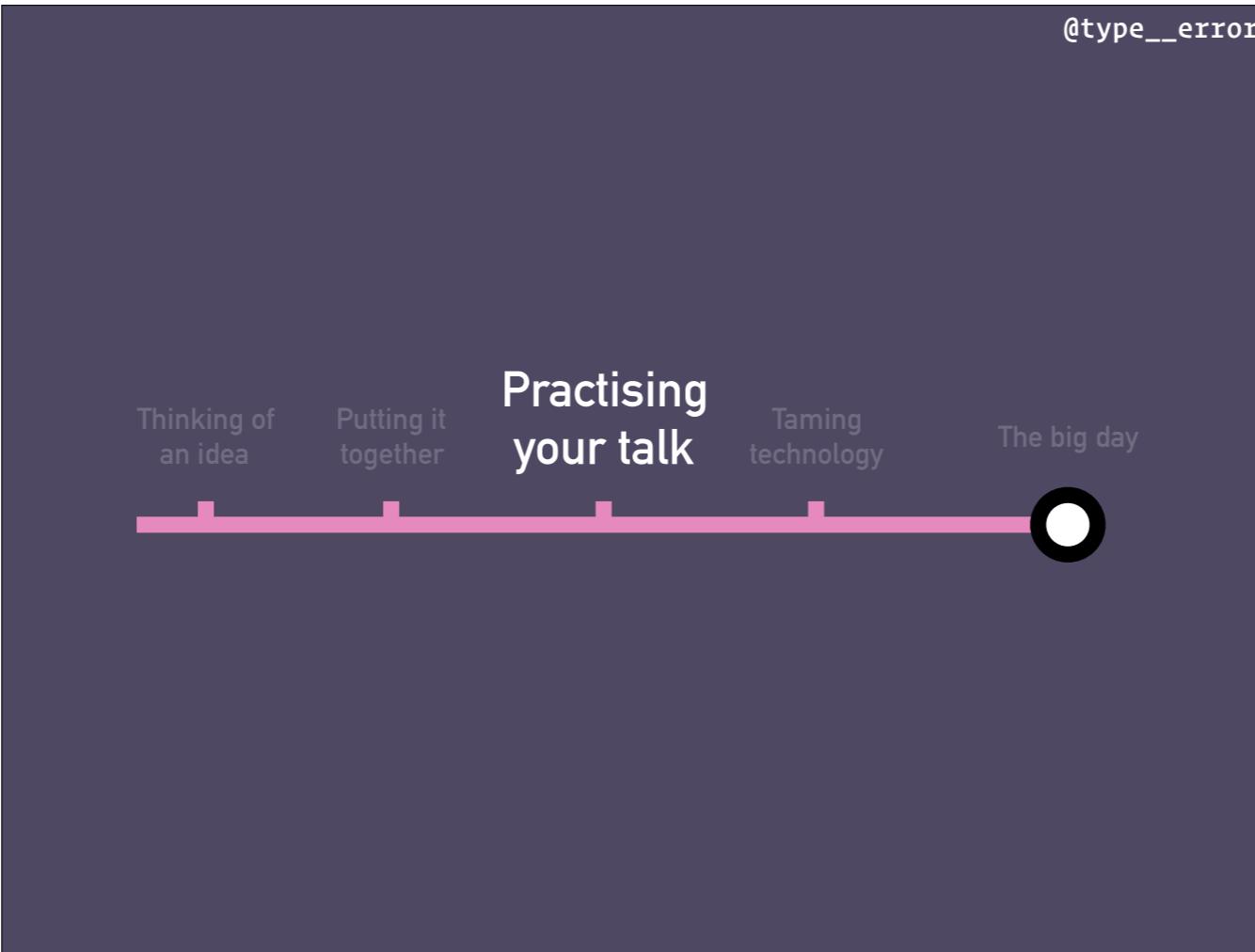
spectacle-code-slide

Mark Jaquith is Lead Dev at Wordpress.

Code is inevitable if you're talking about something technical, but you don't have to put it all on your slide. If you are talking about specific lines of code, you can make the code light grey (for example) and then the line you are talking about bold and easy to read, so the audience knows where to look. (Thanks to Hive engineer Kimberley Cook for that tip)

Talk about the important concepts as succinctly as possible, and put your code samples online to share after rather than shoving them all on the slides. I think this is something I could've done better about my redux-saga talk - there was a lot of code.

If you're using Spectacle, check out [spectacle-code-slide](#) - it's a nifty plugin that lets you go line-by-line through code on a slide so you can talk the audience through it.



Got the slides nailed! Now it's time for a run-through!

PREPARATION

- ★ Practise!
- ★ Manner of delivery is important
- ★ Get a feel for timings
- ★ Try it out at local meetups/at work
- ★ Speak naturally

Practice is so important! It'll give you a feel for how long the talk is, how much you feel comfortable improvising on certain points, and how you are delivering the talk. Remember, it's not just what you say - it's how you say it. The manner of delivery is so important as if you are talking enthusiastically, the audience will be much more interested.

Practise your talk at work, with friends, at local meet ups (like React.JS girls!) - I ran my talk at React Girls first, and it really helped me to anticipate the kind of questions people might have afterwards. And find out which jokes work and which don't! :)

Don't script it - it'll sound really odd, and if you forget what's coming next it's really hard to get back on track. Know the main points, and be able to talk about them naturally.

PRACTISE, PRACTISE, PRACTISE!

"Rehearse three times:

- First alone**
- Second with supportive audience
(partner, friends, colleagues)**
- Finally, a smaller local meetup"**



Jani Eväkallio
(@jevakallio)

Jani again! Some sound advice about practising your talk.

He adds: by the conference you'll know your timings & punchlines by heart and have ironed out any kinks, so you can focus on having fun

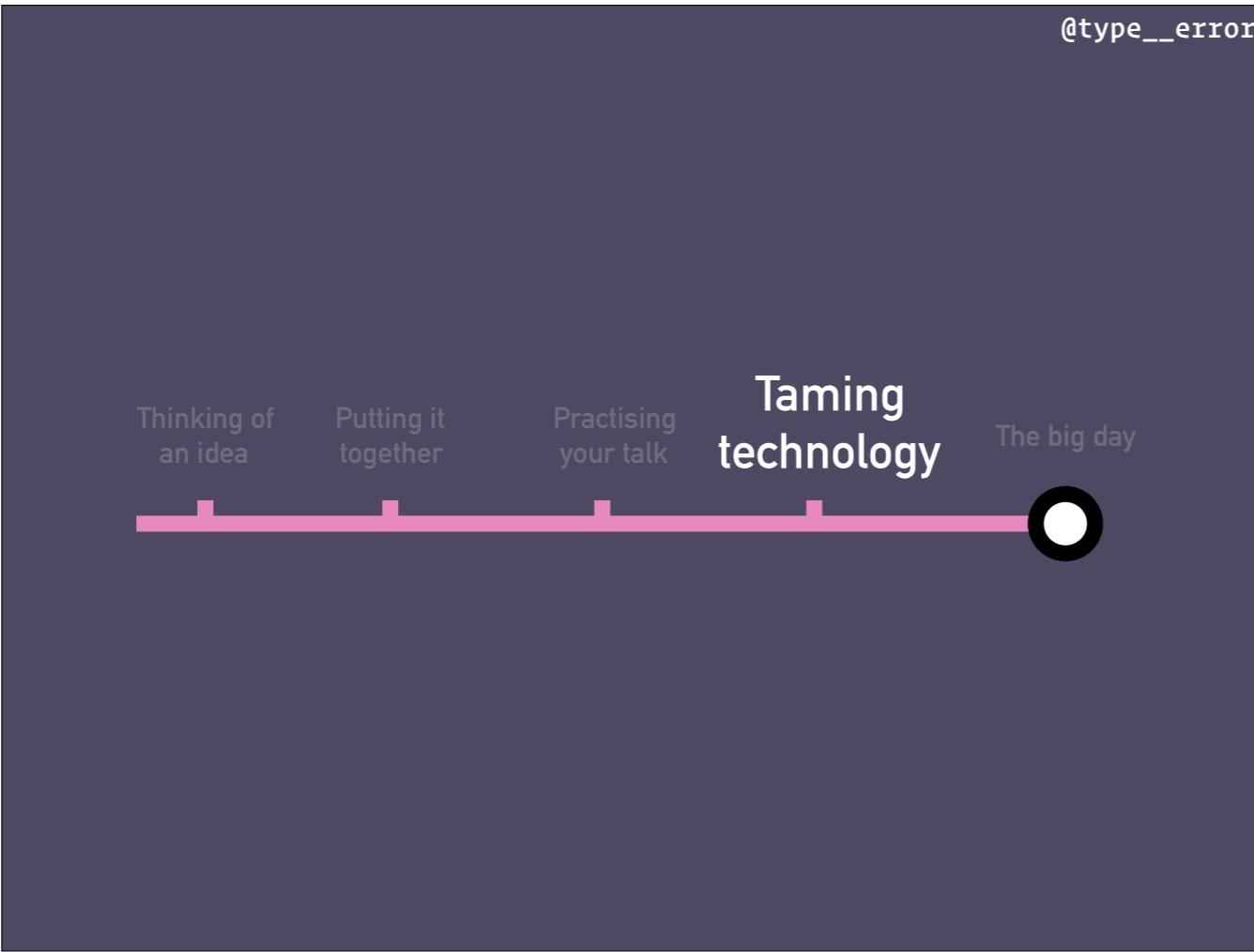
. . . PRACTISE PRACTISE PRACTISE PRACTISE PRACTISE PRACTISE
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"If you haven't practised you will run over. Rehearse the whole talk (to an empty room, then to an audience)."



Dan Abramov
(@dan_abramov)

Dan's first talk was 30 mins - only got through half the slides.



Technology isn't always your friend, even if you're giving a tech talk! Here's what to watch out for.

TAMING TECHNOLOGY

- ★ Beware flaky WiFi!
- ★ Keep a backup of your slides
- ★ Find out the tech setup beforehand
- ★ Bring dongles! (and a clicker)



WiFi isn't necessarily reliable. I've been to a conference where the wifi was completely overloaded by 200 developers trying to connect at the same time. And - god help us all - I've been to a tech conference where there was no wifi and no sockets... prepare for every eventuality. Tethering isn't necessarily possible if there's no signal, so make sure everything works offline. Charge your laptop beforehand.

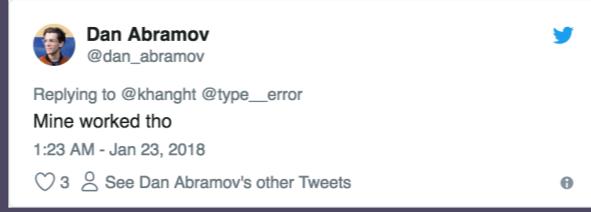
Keep a backup. And a backup of the backup. Offline.

Ask the conference organisers what the setup will be like so you know what to expect and can anticipate any problems beforehand.

You might not be able to see your notes, so make sure you don't rely on them too much.

Bring adaptors for your laptop - e.g. if you have a newer MacBook they might not have a USB-C to HDMI adaptor. And get yourself a clicker - I've never been to a conference that has provided them. Mine was £6 off Amazon and works just fine, plus you look like a pro when using it (and you can move around a bit more naturally rather than staying glued to your laptop)

TO DEMO OR NOT TO DEMO?



The biggest question of all! Should you do a live demo?

I've seen plenty of brilliant live demos but also quite a few that just haven't worked. Doing a live demo is risky, but it's totally up to you if you want to do it.

The key thing is to have a backup in case it goes wrong. And don't feel too bad if it does - the audience isn't going to judge you, as we've all seen demos go wrong before!

HERE'S ONE I MADE EARLIER



Sarah Drasner
(@sarah_edo)

“Make demos work offline and have a backup screen recording of it in action”

SVG whisperer Sarah Drasner has a great tip that I’m definitely going to be using - she records herself doing the demo before the talk, then shows the video during the talk. This way she can talk over the top of the video and tell the audience what she’s doing. It works really well.

and make sure your demos work offline!

(On my Mac, I use Kap for screen recordings)

Thinking of
an idea Putting it
together Practising
your talk Taming
technology **The big day**



It's time! Some top tips for the big day itself

DRESS FOR SUCCESS

“Wear something with a collar and a waistband for the mic. Wear comfy shoes.”



Jen Luker
(@knitcodemonkey)

Jen Luker, Lead Software Engineer at Formidable:

It's important to dress for the talk - and this doesn't necessarily mean wearing a suit! Make sure you are wearing something with a waistband (so usually this means no dresses) because you may have to wear a battery pack for the mic. A collar or neckline that is higher up on the chest is better for a clip-on mic. (Or you may get a handheld mic - not ideal if you are coding as well! - or a Britney-style headband mic)

THE BIG DAY

- ★ Stay hydrated
- ★ Take off your lanyard and any heavy jewellery
- ★ TURN OFF NOTIFICATIONS
- ★ You got this 💪

Bring some water on stage with you. A dry mouth leads to sticky microphone noises! It's totally fine to drink water during your talk.

Jewellery and lanyards can rattle in the mic, so take these off.

BUT SERIOUSLY, TURN OFF YOUR NOTIFICATIONS



Henri Helvetica
(@henrihelvetica)

Airplane mode. Shut off wifi.

Someone who loved my talk was
tweeting non-stop about it and I kept
getting notifications on my watch. I
thought it was an emergency.

Henri Helvetica is a freelance dev.

DEALING WITH NERVES

“Peak scary is ten seconds before the talk. I didn’t anticipate it to be this scary. But once you get into your element it becomes fun.”



Dan Abramov
(@dan_abramov)

My own questionable advice: think of something even more terrifying just before you go on stage! I thought of the time I went on a zipwire, and it was horrendous. I thought, “giving this talk can’t possibly be that bad in comparison” and it made me feel better!

I was nervous just before the talk but it was fine once I was on stage. And loved it!

DEALING WITH NERVES

- ★ Don't forget to breathe!
- ★ Pause to take a sip of water
- ★ Move around a bit
- ★ Slow down

Physiological effects of nervousness are the same as excitement - just tell yourself you're excited and you'll soon believe it!

Don't rush - it's better for you **and** the audience

FAKE IT 'TIL YOU MAKE IT

“Projecting confidence is as good as having it. Even if you are not 100% happy with your talk, nobody knows what it was supposed to look like, so just rock your stuff and don't apologise for a thing.”



Jani Eväkallio
(@jevakallio)

SLIPPING UP



Amanda Stockwell
(@MandaLaceyS)

You'll notice your own mistakes but no-one else knows what you were planning to say. They won't know.



Santosh Hari
(@_s_hari)

If you misspeak, don't get flustered.
Calmly correct and proceed.

It happens! The audience is more forgiving than you think

ON YOUR SIDE

“Everyone’s rooting for you!”



Justin Fagnani
(@justinfagnani)

Damien Brady
(@damovisa)



“Enthusiasm is viral”



Jon Skeet
(@jonskeet)

“The audience is on your side.
They want you to succeed”

If you enjoy yourself, people will enjoy the talk.

A QUESTION OF QUESTIONS

- ★ Repeat the question to the audience
- ★ It's ok to say "I don't know"
- ★ You don't have to take questions at the end



Fernanda Foertter
(@hpcprogrammer)

Best answer I ever gave to a “why would you do it this way” was “why not? Seemed like a good place to start.”

If anyone is difficult... just give them Fernanda's killer answer.

You can always invite people to come up to you afterwards for questions.

MASSIVE THANKS

- ★ Jani Eväkallio
- ★ Naomi Freeman
- ★ Felipe Torres
- ★ Sara Viera
- ★ Khang Hoang
- ★ Jen Luker
- ★ Dan Abramov
- ★ Cynthia Savard
- ★ Henri Helvetica
- ★ Sarah Drasner
- ★ Paul Bone
- ★ Jon Skeet
- ★ Anjuan Simmons
- ★ Scott Hanselman
- ★ Damian Brady
- ★ David East
- ★ Mark Jaquith
- ★ Tomasz Łakomy
- ★ Justin Fagnani
- ★ Claire Inez Mitchell
- ★ Brad Wayne Martin
- ★ Kyle Shevlin
- ★ Alex McPherson
- ★ Fernanda Foertter
- ★ Sunil Pai
- ★ John Wards
- ★ & more!
- ★ Laura Wilson
- ★ Mark Dalgleish

Thank you to everyone who contributed to the megathread on Twitter!

THANK YOU!

- ★ find me on twitter: @type__error (two underscores!)
- ★ blog version of this talk: <https://goo.gl/54FGT4>
- ★ how to write a successful conference proposal by Karolina Szcjur: <https://goo.gl/pS2jow>
- ★ tips for public speaking by Jo Franchetti: <https://goo.gl/ijhf6C>

I wrote a Medium post with all the helpful advice I was given. There are also a couple of really good resources on writing the actual conference proposal and public speaking that I've linked here.