

Point of View

Seven Do's and Don'ts for Giving a Keynote

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Introduction

It's happened! The organizers of a professional conference have invited you to be a keynote speaker at their next event! You are excited because you have sat through numerous keynotes before, and thought, "I could do that...in fact, I could probably do it better." You immediately respond to the invitation in the affirmative. Then, when the conference organizers ask you for a title and an abstract, reality begins to set in. What will be my topic? What are the main ideas I want to convey? Who will be there and how can I connect with them? How clever does the title need to be?

The following list of Do's and Don'ts for keynote speakers is primarily based upon personal experiences attending and giving keynotes and other types of invited presentations stretching back more than 40 years to 1975. It has been my good fortune to be invited to give keynotes and invited addresses at conferences and meetings in more than 30 countries. By no means were all of these presentations flawless, so some of these tips stem from hard lessons I learned firsthand.

Whenever I am invited to speak, I feel I have a professional responsibility to myself, the people who invited me, and most of all, to my audience to prepare the best possible presentation, practice it until I feel confident in my delivery, and present it with great deal of enthusiasm and a strong dose of humility. I can't promise that if you follow all these Do's and avoid all these Don'ts that you'll be a flawless keynote speaker. But I think you'll get invited to give another one.

Keynote Do's and Don'ts

Do 1: Have something to say.

At first glance this may seem to be so obvious as to not warrant mentioning. But, in my experience, a surprising number of keynote speakers present material that is bland and uninspiring. The purpose of a conference keynote is threefold. First, you'll want to challenge old ideas and

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present new ones, perhaps raising issues that have not been previously considered. Second, you should not just criticize, but also recommend feasible steps toward resolving any issues that you have raised. Third, your presentation should leave people thinking in new ways, promoting conversations that continue through the rest of the conference, and ideally beyond.

Some of the best presentations I have seen are TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) Talks that can be viewed online at <https://www.ted.com/>. Donovan (2014) described TED Talks as being "more than entertaining; they are inspirational. Moreover, they are packed with ideas that not only are worth spreading but also are worth applying...immediately" (p. 5). No one gets to be a TED Talk speaker without having something important to say.

Don't 1: Even if you have something to say, avoid saying it over and over.

This may not always be the fault of the speaker, but some well-known keynoters seem to give virtually the same talk time after time. Perhaps these keynoters are so popular that they have become analogous to well-established rock bands that may desire to spotlight their "new stuff," but whose fans demand they play their greatest hits again and again.

Frankly, the people issuing the invitation to speak at conferences have a major role to play in avoiding this problem. Most of the invitations I have received to speak at conferences are open-ended, so I generally provide the organizers with titles and abstracts for three or four different presentations. Usually, the organizers choose one of my ideas, but occasionally I have engaged in a week or two of dialog focused on identifying the best possible topic for my presentation.

Do 2: Practice your presentation again and again.

Practice is important for several reasons. You want to be confident in both the substance of your message and its delivery. Timing is essential. One of the most annoying habits of some speakers is to have too many PowerPoint slides, and then to rush through some of them or entirely skip others as time winds down. I once saw a keynote speaker do this, and then tell the audience that "This always happens." I immediately thought that if "this always happens," the speaker has done a poor job of planning and practicing his presentations!

When Steve Jobs was forced out of Apple in 1988, he started the NeXT Computer company. I saw him give a keynote in which he demonstrated the at-the-time cutting-edge NeXT workstation at the 1990 EDUCOM conference in Atlanta. Midway through this particular keynote, the NeXT computer suddenly crashed. Jobs continued to speak without missing a beat, while two or three technicians scrambled on stage and quickly replaced the faulty machine with a new one. Jobs and his team had obviously practiced this presentation many times, including how to minimize disruption should a system failure occur.

Don't 2: Never read your presentation to the audience.

Frankly, it shocks me when a keynote speaker reads a

presentation. This can be forgiven when someone must speak in a second language, but it is very disappointing when speakers are using their native tongue. I recall an American keynoter at an Australian research conference who read aloud from a text that included so many convoluted sentences that the speaker actually stumbled over several and had to repeat them. Halfway through the presentation, many attendees were walking out and most of those who stayed were checking their programs, looking at their phones, or otherwise tuning out. The speaker didn't have a clue, and just went right on reading.

Your keynote presentation can certainly be scripted—written out in great detail in advance. But reading it to the attendees is almost invariably a huge mistake. Instead, you should practice it numerous times, first by yourself, perhaps in front of a mirror, and then for a small group of colleagues. Try out presentations on your students and friends. The best TED Talk speakers clearly have practiced their delivery numerous times (Donovan, 2014).

Do 3: Know your audience.

Well before your presentation, try to find out as much as you can about the types of people who will be in your audience, their interests and concerns, and their motivation for attending this particular event. To the extent possible, create authentic connections between their interests and your message. As with the first time you meet someone, keynote speakers only have a brief time to make a good first impression with their audience. If you can, try to arrive early, and then, as people come into the room, greet them, thank them for coming, and make them feel welcome.

During your presentation, try to maintain eye contact with the audience. This is difficult to do, and I try to focus on different parts of the audience from time to time. I don't look right into the eyes of individual people because in some cultures this is considered rude. But I do try to keep my eyes on the audience much more than on my laptop or notes.

Stories are great ways to establish rapport with your audience because when we share our real-world experiences, we make ourselves seem more human and establish a sense of community with the audience. I often begin my presentations with a story about my upbringing, or my earliest days of schooling. Other speakers use different types of stories. Watch the 20 most popular TED Talks of all time at <https://www.ted.com>, and you'll see that one common thread is that most of these speakers establish rapport with their audience by telling some sort of personal story.

Don't 3: Misjudge your audience.

This may be different in other fields, but at educational technology conferences, some keynote speakers fail to challenge audiences sufficiently. Instead, they repeat the same tired old messages, e.g., the oft-repeated story that "yes, all the previous technologies that were going to revolutionize education didn't, but wait, I can now present to you the one that will change everything." My contemporaries and I have heard it all, beginning with programmed instruction and instructional television, through interactive videodisc and the World Wide Web, and today's hyperbolic promises about learning analytics and 3D Printers.

If you are asked to speak at an educational technology

conference, you hopefully won't misjudge your audience because you are a member of this field. But when you are asked to speak at events outside your field, you'll need to be especially vigilant not to make too many assumptions about the audience's prior knowledge. Avoid using jargon or acronyms unique to your field. Take the audience's perspective into careful consideration rather than relying upon your expert perspective alone.

Do 4: Use humor cautiously.

Humor is a great way to connect with an audience, but it must be used with caution. I have had the honor of being invited to speak in Australia and New Zealand a dozen times. I often begin my presentations in faraway places with a bit of self-deprecating remarks about myself, and the international audiences have usually been appreciative. By contrast, I cringed when I witnessed a keynote speaker from the United Kingdom begin his keynote in Sydney, Australia by complaining about how long it took him to get to the "antipodes" and poking fun at the "crude" language of the taxi driver who drove him to his hotel. This did not go over well with the Aussies, and their reception of the rest of his presentation was soured. In my experience, humor works best when you make *yourself* the target of the humor.

Don't 4: Tell insensitive jokes.

Humor that even in the most "innocent" way has a wisp of sexism, racism, homophobia, ageism, or any other such factor should be avoided at all costs. Whereas this kind of thing was regrettably prevalent when I first entered the field of educational technology in the 1970s, it has thankfully decreased dramatically at our recent conferences.

Jokes of any kind are especially risky in other cultures. What might be perceived as funny and in good taste in your own culture can be misinterpreted in others. It is rarely worth the risk. Many years ago, when I speaking in an Asian country, most attendees were listening to a translation of my presentation using headphones. I tried to tell a joke, but there was an awkward delay between my punchline and the ripple of laughter that crossed the room. I later asked someone about that, and I was told that the translator had quickly said, "I think the speaker has told a joke, please laugh."

Do 5: Use PowerPoint to support your message, not enable your presentation.

Practically everyone complains about PowerPoint, yet very few keynote speakers present without it, myself included. I suspect that most of us have a love-hate relationship with it. It is a tool and its value is determined by how it is used.

We've all had the experience of watching invited speakers read their bullet points on PowerPoint slides to us. These kinds of speakers are clearly using PowerPoint as a visual aid for their own benefit, not for the audience. I surely did some of this early in my career, except I was using overhead transparencies rather than PowerPoint.

The "holy grail" of PowerPoint for me is to give an entire presentation without any words on the screen, just memorable pictures that amplify my message. I recently gave the Founders Day Lecture at the University of Georgia.

During my lecture, “So you think you’re smarter than a robot: Winning the race between human learning and deep learning,” I nearly attained my goal of a wordless set of PowerPoint slides. Only three of my 48 slides had text that I had entered, and one of them simply said “Thank you.” Perhaps I can banish all text from my next presentation to help the audience better focus on my message.

Don’t 5: Use technology that you have not tested.

Some speakers eschew PowerPoint in favor of new presentations tools such as Prezi or Camtasia. This might be advantageous, but only if you have really practiced with the new tool. Who hasn’t seen a speaker get lost when using Prezi or have a fancy multimedia segment fail?

It is also important to know your room and the technology in it. PowerPoint slides that may look great on your laptop will be washed out with certain projectors. If you incorporate audio, you must be sure that you have a reliable feed into the house audio system and that volume controls are properly adjusted beforehand. Acoustics are especially important in large spaces such as hotel ballrooms or convention center auditoriums. Visit the space the day before your keynote to check out how your slides look, audio capabilities, etc.

Do 6: Seek to establish rapport with the audience.

There are several ways to establish rapport with an audience. One perhaps surprising way is to share your vulnerability. One of the top five TED Talks of all time was by Social Work Professor Brené Brown from the University of Houston, whose presentation was titled “The Power of Vulnerability.” In her talk, she made the case that acknowledging and sharing our vulnerability is what makes us truly human. In the context of a keynote, the expression of vulnerability entails communicating to the audience that although you have some expertise that warrants your role as a keynote speaker, you definitely don’t have all the answers. You want to invite the audience into a shared quest for new understanding.

Another important way of establishing rapport with an audience is to show that you care and to demonstrate that you are making a sincere effort to make your presentation as meaningful for your audience as possible. How you dress, the care with which your presentation materials are crafted, the tone of your voice—these and other factors are important in the overall milieu that you create and nurture in the shared space and time of your keynote. Take it seriously, but have fun.

Don’t 6: Phone it in.

Few things frustrate me more than keynote speakers who “phone it in.” This colloquial expression refers to doing something in a perfunctory fashion, as if whatever you are doing doesn’t really matter. Often these types of uncommitted speakers start their presentation with an apology such as “I really meant to update my PowerPoint slides, but there just wasn’t time.”

Unless there is an important reason, don’t begin your presentation with an apology. Speak with confidence. Don’t

speaking too fast or too softly. You may actually need to slow down your speech to about 100–120 words per minute, about thirty percent fewer words than normal conversation. This is especially important when you have an international audience in which there are many people listening in a second language.

Do 7: Make yourself available to attendees.

A personal peeve of mine is when keynote speakers breeze into a conference at the last minute, deliver their presentation, and then “poof,” they’re gone. Here again, the conference organizers have a role. Some big conferences pay tens of thousands of dollars for “star” keynote speakers, and it is very difficult to keep these people around very long. But if you are an academic invited to speak at a conference, plan to stay for all or as much of the event as you can. Some conferences formalize this by having a separate Question and Answer or Discussion session after the keynote, thus setting up an opportunity for more interaction between the speaker and the audience.

When I am invited to give a keynote, I almost always stay for the whole conference, even when I might end up paying for a night or two of accommodations myself. I enjoy the time with other people and the opportunity to learn new things. Most of my invitations to speak have been at educational technology events, but I have also given invited presentations at conferences focused on other fields. These have been great learning events for me.

Don’t 7: Fail to follow-up.

Sometimes invited speakers make promises during their presentations that they don’t keep. For a simple example, if you announce that your PowerPoint presentation will be available for downloading, then make sure it *is*, within a brief time period. Invite attendees to ask follow-up questions via e-mail, and then respond to those messages in good faith.

Write thank-you notes to the conference organizers and any people who helped you with your keynote. Some lasting friendships and fruitful scholarly collaborations have resulted from the contacts I have made with people who attended my presentations. I also bring small mementoes from my university to give away at sessions, such as pens or t-shirts. This seems to be especially appreciated when speaking abroad.

Conclusion

One of the rewards of a career in educational technology is the opportunity to travel. On Facebook, I have been following the travels for speaking engagements of a new generation of educational technology scholars, and it is wonderful to see the opportunities opening up to them around the globe. When your first or next speaking invitation comes, grab it, and make it the best presentation of your life. All of us will benefit when you do. □

Reference

Donovan, J. (2014). *How to deliver a TED talk: Secrets of the world's most inspiring presentations*. Columbus, OH: McGraw-Hill Education.