# SPEAKER CAMP

**A SELF-PACED WORKSHOP FOR PLANNING, PITCHING, PREPARING, AND PRESENTING AT CONFERENCES**

RUSS UNGER

SAMANTHA STARMER

Foreword by **Jared Spool**

# Praise for *Speaker Camp*

*As an accomplished speaker who now teaches and encourages others in the field to speak publicly, this is the book I would have written. It's your A-to-Z guide for how to become a public speaker, covering every nook and cranny of the process. While it's tailored to those who work in the tech and design fields, anyone looking to become a public speaker can benefit from this book.*

*Jessica Ivins,*
**Senior UX Designer**

*The fear of public speaking sits amongst the highest possible fears, and under-standably so. It's not easy to step in front of an audience, large or small, and pres-ent on a given topic. Fortunately,* Speaker Camp*, by Russ Unger and Samantha Starmer, will help you overcome that fear and prepare you to give the presentation you dream of. Working step by step from idea to creation to stepping on stage,* Speaker Camp *puts you in a position to give the perfect presentation. It's an enjoy-able book filled with excellent insights and advice, well worth the read for new speakers or experienced veterans!*

*Shay Howe,*
**Designer, Front-End Developer, Problem Solver**

*This book provides a thorough walk-through of everything you need to think about and do as you grow to success as a conference speaker. The chapters each serve to coach, mentor, encourage, and caution the reader. If you're eager to increase your confidence in all aspects of conference speaking, then you definitely need this book.*

*Steve Portigal,*
**Author of *Interviewing Users: How to Uncover Compelling Insights***

*This is the book I wish I'd had when I first began applying to speak at conferences.* Speaker Camp *demystifies the process, answers the questions you'd be embar-rassed to ask, and holds your hand as you create a proposal, build a presentation, and give the talk. It's going to make my next presentation a lot easier.*

*Laura Creekmore,*
**President of Creek Content**

# Praise for *Speaker Camp*

*Russ and Samantha know all there is to know about great conferences, as both are experienced speakers and savvy organizers. Let this book guide you through the entire process, and learn how to inspire your audience.*

*Cennydd Bowles,*
**Design Lead at Twitter, Author of** *Undercover User Experience Design*

*Speaking at conferences is a common goal for designers, or anyone, really, who has become so interested in a topic that they want to share what they've seen and learned. But the steps to actually getting there—pulling together ideas, writing proposals, and pitching your presentation to organizers—can be daunting. It's hard to argue with Russ and Samantha's success in this space, and this book breaks down their thoughts and process in clear and intriguing ways. As an experienced speaker, reading it gave me new clarity and perspectives on the somewhat haphazard way I sometimes go about coming up with ideas for presentations and pitching them. I'll most certainly be recommending this to anyone who asks me for advice on getting into public speaking.*

*Adam Connor,*
**Design Director, Illustrator, Speaker**

*It is easy to go straight to designing the content and visual aids for a presentation, but they won't be seen if the proposal isn't given due time and won't be remembered if the presentation isn't well rehearsed and delivered. Speaker Camp gives clear tips and suggestions for every step in the speaking process, right down to investing in the right presentation tools. It is a must-read for anyone interested in speaking at conferences, workshops, or any event.*

*Tonia M. Bartz,*
**UX Designer, Ethnographer**

Speaker Camp *provides an incredibly methodical, but straightforward, guide for proposing and preparing presentations. Each section offers relevant questions to help you think through the nitty-gritty details that can often make or break your talk. It doesn't just cover slides and speaking technique; it helps you tailor your big idea to the audience and theme of the conference—thus making your talks more effective and, as a result, you more confident.*

*Amanda Morrow,*
**Interactive Designer at BitMethod**

# Praise for *Speaker Camp*

*There's no magical potion that makes public speaking any less terrifying, but with this book, Russ and Samantha have created the next best thing: a comprehensive, thoughtful, sensible approach to presenting and speaking. Though I have considerable client-facing presentation experience, I have spoken at only a few conferences and public venues, and* Speaker Camp *has helped demystify and de-terrify the conference preparation process for me.*

**Gabby Hon,**
**Senior User Experience Consultant**

*Setting yourself up to deliver a great presentation takes some serious prep work, and nobody knows it better than Starmer and Unger. In* Speaker Camp, *they've broken it down to a science. This playbook should be in the hands of everyone daring enough to take the stage and anyone hell-bent on nailing their next talk.*

**Dennis Kardys,**
**Design Director at WSOL, Author, Speaker**

*There are shelves of books about public speaking in the world. But this one, the one in your hands, is better. As a conference speaker and organizer, I can say this is the best practical guide I've read for creating an effective presentation, marketing yourself to conference organizers, and building the confidence to impress an audience. If only I'd had it when I began speaking...*

**J Cornelius,**
**Founder of Nine Labs, President of the Atlanta Web Design Group,**
**Creator of the Web Afternoon conference series**

*Smart, inspirational, and relentlessly practical,* Speaker Camp *weaves an insightful starter toolkit for preparing, submitting, and delivering impactful conference presentations. Its engaging style features carefully researched content supplemented by candid real-life examples, demystifying the ingredients of a great talk as seen through the eyes of seasoned speakers and content curators worldwide. A must-read for first-time presenters and useful reference material for those looking to fine-tune their craft.*

**Cornelius Rachieru,**
**Co-chair, UXcamp Ottawa**

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RUSS UNGER

SAMANTHA STARMER

Foreword by **Jared Spool**

**Speaker Camp: A Self-paced Workshop for Planning, Pitching, Preparing, and Presenting at Conferences**
**Russ Unger and Samantha Starmer**

**New Riders**
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# Acknowledgments

## Mutual Gratitude

Jared Spool sat in on our first Speaker Camp workshop in Chicago and provided thoughtful critique and insight throughout the day, while also offering his guidance to the attendees during their individual presentations. On top of that, he has been generous with his time and advice, and we're flattered that he provided us with the Foreword to this book.

Dan Willis, that crazy genius, started off the Cranky Talk Workshops and invited both of us to be faculty. It was an amazing experience—one that changed our lives and made us dramatically better at this speaking at conferences stuff. We can't thank Dan enough for the opportunity, and we hope we've done this spin-off some justice. Our other Cranky Talk alums, Adam Polansky, Dan M. Brown, Karen McGrane, and Tom Willis, have all been a great source of inspiration, and we're deeply honored to have had the opportunity to work with and learn from each of you.

We are forever grateful to the many brilliant people who helped us through the writing of this book. We're thankful to have been able to get time with some of the brightest minds that we know, who shared their insights with us. In no particular order: Jeffrey Zeldman, Hugh Forrest, Barak Danin, Bruno Figueiredo, Clark Sell, Jen and Jim Remsik, Andy Budd, J Cornelius, Cornelius Rachieru, Brad Smith, Eric Reiss, Jonathon Colman, Adam Connor, Aaron Irizarry, Gabby Hon, Brad Nunnally, Kristina Halvorson, Dan M. Brown, Karen McGrane, Christian Lane, Eytan Mirsky, Jesse James Garrett, Susan Weinschenk, Jessica Ivins, Stephen P. Anderson, Shay Howe, Steve Portigal, Laura Creekmore, Cennydd Bowles, Nick Finck, Jess McMullin, Tonia M. Bartz, Amanda Morrow, Dennis Kardys, Christopher Mayfield, Andy Crestodina, Andy Hullinger, Gretchen Frickx, Dennis Schleicher, Tim Frick, Christian Crumlish, Drew McLellan, Bryan Eisenberg, Greg Nudelman, Carole Burns, and Brad Simpson.

We'd also like to thank everyone at New Riders who helped make this book possible: Michael Nolan, Glenn Bisignani, the Jens—Jennifer Lynn and Jennifer Needham—(who are amazing!), Aren Straiger, Danielle Foster, Patricia Pane, and Joy Dean Lee.

## Russ Unger

As usual, my wife, Nicolle, and our daughters, Sydney and Avery, taught me a lot about what it means to be supportive, if not hilarious, during a book-writing endeavor. I'm blessed to have a wonderful mother, a caring extended family, and a bunch of pretty incredible friends who offered their support and kindness along the way, too.

Samantha Starmer has been an outstanding partner through our workshop and book-writing enterprise—and I think we've had fun doing this juggling act with full-time jobs, life, and other crazy commitments!

Michael Nolan was really foundational in making this happen—he's got a long list of authors you know and love to read in his stable, and when we were talking about things happening in the world, it was his idea to turn Speaker Camp into a book. It's been a lot of fun to bring it to life, and I'm indebted to Michael for nudging (kicking) it in the right direction.

I had a lot of amazing friends and experts sharing their insight this time around, and they really helped to sand off some of the corners of the content. These folks are phenomenal, and if you ever have the opportunity to see one of them speak, attend one of their events, or meet them in person, you simply must make the effort to do so!

As always, the amazing Brad Simpson (www.i-rradiate.com) was the chief of helping out with all things of a visual design nature for the home team. I had great support from Gabby Hon, Brad Nunnally, Laura Creekmore, Whitney Hess, Karl Fast, Jesse James Garrett, David Armano, Christian Lane, Eytan Mirsky, Alex Dittmer, Jeffrey Zeldman, Hugh Forrest, Barak Danin, Bruno Figueiredo, Clark Sell, Jen and Jim Remsik, Andy Budd, J Cornelius, Brad Smith, Eric Reiss, Ric Soens, Chris Fahey, Adam Connor, Aaron Irizarry, Kristina Halvorson, Dan M. Brown, Karen McGrane, Susan Weinschenk, Jessica Ivins, Stephen P. Anderson, Shay Howe, Steve Portigal, Cennydd Bowles, Tonia M. Bartz, Amanda Morrow, Dennis Kardys, Christian Crumlish, Drew McLellan, Bryan Eisenberg, Greg Nudelman, Carole Burns, the late Dr. Arthur Doederlein, the Chicago Build Guild, the Cranky Talkers, Lou Rosenfeld and all of the Rosenfeld Media Experts, the Chicago Camps (http://chicagocamps.org) team, all the people who attended and helped out with our first Speaker Camp workshop, and everyone else who may have been inadvertently overlooked—you were all very much a part of helping to make this happen. And Jonathan "Yoni" Knoll.

## Samantha Starmer

When Russ Unger first raised the idea of *Speaker Camp*, I couldn't decide if I was thrilled or terrified. I decided that both emotions meant I just had to take the plunge and thus undertook this fantastic journey. Russ has been an incredible partner and friend, and everything great about this effort comes down to his amazing energy and his abilities to herd cats with grace and to always make me smile. I would willingly walk any future tightrope with Russ leading the way.

There are so many people over the years who have inspired me, taught me, and mentored me to become a better speaker and to always continue learning. In order not to miss any of them inadvertently, I'm not going to attempt a comprehensive list. But I have a vivid memory of James Robertson convincing me many years ago while at an early IA Summit that I, too, might have something to say. Thanks to James for that not-so-subtle nudge that helped start all of this wonderful craziness. And thanks to every student I've taught, employee I've worked with, and person I've mentored and been mentored by. Each and every one of you has given me courage and made your mark.

And the biggest thanks to my husband, Sean, who has supported me in everything I want to do, even when it means that he is always the one to cook dinner and clean the cat box.

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# Foreword

I go to a lot of conferences every year—probably 40 to 50 of them. At many of them, I give a presentation. But that's not the real reason I go.

The real reason I go is because I'm looking to hear new presenters. I want to hear their thinking. I'm really interested in the twist they'll put on a method or concept. I'm thrilled when I can hear about the journey they've taken.

Most of these folks are presenting for the first time. They've never been in front of any audience, and now they're in front of their peers, sharing these new ideas. And that's exciting.

What's even more exciting is finding someone who is really good. Their story is solid. Their presentation techniques are polished. I'm sucked right into what they're saying, and they've got me hooked.

It's like discovering a new band nobody has ever heard of or eating at a new restaurant that the crowds haven't found yet. There I am, in the room, hearing this great talk.

Here's the funny thing: The odds are *against* this happening. The first-time presentation business is a really tough one to succeed in.

When I was younger—much younger—I did a lot of acting. When I first started, I was handed a script to perform from. Not just any script, but a vetted, popular script. (It was a Neil Simon play. I played a grumpy cop with a couple of dozen lines. Funny stuff, if I said it right.)

I also had a great director. She had wonderful patience with me as a new actor. She gave me solid direction, often multiple times, until I finally "got it." We rehearsed my part for weeks before the first performance, and I was able to really hone my performance.

All the advantages I had as a first-time actor are not what we give our first-time presenters. We ask them to write their own scripts instead of using vetted ones. We insist they do all their own direction instead of working under the guidance of someone experienced. Most of these presentations should, just by the nature of how they happen, be miserable performances by obvious amateurs.

Yet I go to these conferences, plunk myself in the session room, and voilà, find myself immersed in a great presentation by a first-time speaker. The thoughtfulness and preparation ooze off the podium. And I'm entranced.

You're holding a book that will help your first presentation join the cadre of great performances. Even if you've given presentations before, Russ and Samantha have many, many techniques and hints you can take advantage of.

As you read the book, start to think about what'll make your presentation great. Think about the story you'll tell. Have you brought your own point of view to the forefront? Have you told us what your journey was, highlighting both the peaks and the valleys? Do you have a solid beginning, middle, and end?

And what about your direction? Do you know what points you'll emphasize? Do you have quiet, slower moments that give the audience a chance to reflect on the points you've just made? Is your passion coming through or are you holding back?

Read Russ and Samantha's wisdom, and imagine what your performance will be like. Don't be worried if you start to get nervous. We all get nervous. (Come visit me ten minutes before I walk on a stage, and you'll see me working hard to keep my nerves from getting to me.) It's how you know you're doing it right.

All this work and preparation is completely worth it. When you've done it well, it will help your personal brand. Folks will approach you about coming to work for them, even if you're happy where you are and not looking to move.

It'll also help the organization you work for. Presenting cool stuff about how your team is tackling important issues makes everyone look good. Don't be surprised if someone comes up to you afterward and asks if you're hiring (which is great because it can be hard to find exceptional talent these days when you do have an opening).

And, probably most importantly, *it'll make the world a better place.* By putting your thinking out there, you get other people thinking about their preconceived notions. Even if all you do is help them confirm that they know this stuff, you're giving them the gift of confidence. We all can use a little more confidence some days.

You're very brave to explore the wonderful world of giving presentations. I hope you're excited about it, because I certainly am. I can't wait to plop myself in the chair at your first session and hear what you have to tell the audience. It's why I came to the conference.

Go out and be an awesome presenter.

Jared M. Spool, Founding Principal, User Interface Engineering
Andover, Massachusetts

# Introduction

*Getting up on stage and giving a great presentation is easy!*

—No one. Ever.

Congratulations! You have taken the big leap toward getting up on stage in front of a live audience, and that's no small feat. This is a big moment! Savor it, revel in it, and acknowledge yourself for how brave you are—you've just made a commitment to do something that, for many people, ranks as one of their biggest fears.

When you present a topic to a group of people, you're starting to own your perspective about it. You're creating your unique view and sharing it with the world, and that's impressive.

If you're feeling a little uncomfortable, well, you're probably not yet uncomfortable enough. When you've got a room full of eyes watching your every movement, it can be daunting. In this book we hope we are able to share enough of our experiences—and the experiences of some other people who know a thing or two about presenting—from on the stage and behind the scenes, to get you to the point where it's a lot less daunting.

Presenting at a conference is a pretty compelling thing. There's great joy in the feeling of finishing a strong talk, particularly when you're in a line-up of other presenters that you're a big fan of. And up until that moment, there can be a lot of great stress, too. Knowing that, many of us still jump at the chance to get there and share the interesting things we've learned.

We're very excited that you've chosen to try your hand at presenting—in part because it's always great to see people trying new things, and in part because we hope we have the opportunity to be in your audience and become your fans.

In this book we will walk you through a variety of tips and techniques that can help you find your way to presenting at conferences. We start at the onset of the spark of your first big idea—and, in fact, we'll even help you find that first big idea if you haven't already! While we have each presented regularly and have felt successful to some degree, we've also had our share of bombs. And we still get back on the horse.

We've each had:

- Presentation submissions that were rejected by conferences we really wanted to speak at. Repeatedly.

- Presentations that started with a good idea but weren't structured well and ended up rambling or confusing. And people told us about it.

- Presentations that were underrehearsed, that had technical challenges, poorly designed slides, or no clear ending, or that went over or under the time limit. And we still encounter these things.

We set out to share some of our mistakes and the hard-earned lessons that we've learned along the way. We've asked some pretty brilliant people to share some of their experiences and opinions as well, in order to help you get started presenting as quickly, easily, and successfully as possible.

One more thing: It's helpful to remember that there are a lot more people submitting proposals to conferences than there are spots to be filled. Rejection doesn't mean that your idea or content isn't good enough; it might just mean that the competition was fierce and your topic didn't fit as well as other ideas that were submitted. Don't give up—revisit your content and try again somewhere else! There are a lot of great options out there, from local meet-ups to national and international conferences, and by doing a little research, you can find great potential venues for your presentation.

> **NOTE**  If you're not sure where you can submit your ideas, Lanyrd.com is a great resource for seeking out conferences.

## Why We Wrote This Book

This book is not going to make you a great presenter.

You're going to have to do that.

The great ones, well, they make it look effortless. That's why they're great—they wow you, with brilliant facts, great stories, and beautiful slides, and they manage to somehow make you feel as if you're a part of a conversation with them. And frankly, we aspire to be just like them, too. We're lucky; a bunch of those great presenters shared their thoughts with us—as did some of the planners of the best conferences around—and that helped us shape what turned into this book.

This book, however, is going to give you some guidance and help you navigate the unfamiliar territory of finding the opportunity to get started down the path of presenting at conferences. We tried our best to share all of the things that we wish someone would have told us years ago when we first started down this path. We're fairly sure we still would have made a lot of the same mistakes that we've made; however, we probably could have made them a bit sooner, and we probably wouldn't have had to flounder so much to get to them.

We wrote this book because we've learned a lot as we've been giving our presentations over the years and because we would have liked to have had a reference like this available to us. We also wrote this book because we've done work with new presenters—both through the Cranky Talk Workshops that Dan Willis founded and through wonderful conferences, like the IA Summit (http://iasummit.org), that put a serious focus on bringing new presenters and their ideas onto their conference stages. We can sincerely say that with each chance we've had to do that work, we've felt energized, excited, and very selfishly like we learned far more than we had shared.

Presenting to an audience is a gift. When your presentation is successful, you'll know it, and there aren't many greater feelings in the world. We've each been lucky to have known that feeling a few times, and we wrote this book hoping that we can help you find that feeling, too.

## Who Should Read This Book

We think that this book will be great for those of you who are just starting out in your presenting careers. You've possibly never even submitted to a conference before; or maybe you did and you were really unsure about what you were doing; or maybe you've given a few presentations and you wish you had a bit more structure to what you've been doing so far. If you fall into one of those categories, you're probably a good candidate for *Speaker Camp*.

We've also heard from conference organizers that this is a book they'd recommend to people who are getting started at presenting.

# 4 STRUCTURING YOUR PRESENTATION

Structure is perhaps one of the most critical components of a presentation. Without structure there is no clear narrative, and ultimately the goal of your presentation is lost. Structure is what can bond five seemingly random ideas together to form a powerful message that drives home the overall goal of your talk.

—Nick Finck

Developing the structure for your presentation may not feel like the most exciting part of the presentation process, but we promise that the rest of the steps will be easier if you dedicate time to this effort. Creating an underlying structure for your presentation will greatly assist with the winnowing and clarifying steps you will be going through as you refine your presentation. A strong structure can also help you avoid feeling overwhelmed by the effort of birthing a fully blown set of slides from the germ of an idea you are starting with.

Good structure doesn't just help with the presentation process; it also increases your likelihood of giving a successful presentation when your speaking slot finally comes. A strongly defined narrative and organizational framework for your presentation will keep the audience's attention, help them grasp any complex topics in your talk, and ensure that they take away your most important points. And solid structure helps you make sure that you end your presentation on time and on a strong note—there is nothing more disappointing than a presentation that starts off promising but fails to deliver a satisfying ending.

# Start with Your Presentation Goals

Before you even begin to develop your presentation structure, it is important to spend some thoughtful time clarifying your presentation goals. When you ask yourself questions about why and what you are presenting, as well as what you hope to accomplish, you will clarify your topic, its primary points, and what you want the audience to take away from your time together. Without clear goals, it is far too easy for your presentation to meander through the allotted time slot, leaving your audience lost or unable to recall the valuable points you worked so hard to convey.

## What Are You Presenting?

Start by ensuring that you are very clear on what you are presenting. At this point in the presentation process, you have identified your presentation topic and written your title, abstract, and bio. These are good first steps toward structuring your presentation, but remember that the process of writing your presentation abstract focuses mainly on how to fit within the conference submission process and how to get accepted as a speaker.

The presentation itself needs to build on this beginning work, but instead of being focused on the conference submission process and those choosing the speakers, it needs to be directed toward the audience who will be attending your session. Before you begin putting your presentation together, consider the following:

- What do you want the audience to get out of your presentation?
- If they were to remember only one thing from your presentation, what should it be?
- What should your audience be compelled to do after your presentation?

You should be able to answer these questions clearly and succinctly.

### Don't Panic!

At this point in the process, you may be wondering how you are going to fill all 30 or 45 minutes of the presentation slot you have submitted for. You may be anxious about having enough great material that you can confidently stand up in front of an audience and hold their attention for all of that time without resorting to tap dancing and bad impressions.

The reality is that most presentations allow for less time to speak on a topic than the depth of expertise you are bringing to it would permit and than the amount of material you probably want to cover would require. A successful presentation requires synthesizing a lot of background, experience, and expertise into a succinct capsule of information that can be crisply communicated in the brief period of time you will be speaking. (And from someone who has taught all-day classes many times, you would be amazed at how brief a period even a full day feels like when you get rolling. As Russ says, "Time moves differently on stage than in any rehearsal!")

This synthesis requires that you clearly understand and prioritize your main points. The added bonus of defining your presentation goals is that you will have already started the work toward building a great presentation that will perfectly fill your allotted time and that your audience will remember.

## Why Are You Presenting?

Next, get as clear as you can on why you are presenting. Unless you are very clear on why are you speaking and what points you want to make, your audience won't be clear either.

Knowing why you are presenting also helps you avoid the pitfall of being so close to your topic and the messages you want to convey that you forget that your audience needs to be brought along on the journey. They are attending your talk to learn something new, which means that they probably don't have the knowledge and background on your topic that you do. So don't forget to lead them toward the main points.

Clarifying "why you are presenting" should also help you understand your underlying goals for signing up for all of this work (e.g., to educate others on a topic you think is vital, to enhance your career breadth). Defining what you want to accomplish will help you fulfill the necessary steps toward a positive outcome. With awareness of why you are presenting, you can more easily determine what you need to cover so that you fulfill your presentation goals.

## Why Should the Audience Care?

And finally, it's important to specify why the audience should care about your topic, about your perspective, and about your presentation overall. The first two questions—what are you presenting and why are you presenting—help you gain clarity on the "what" of the presentation; this third question ensures that you understand and can therefore communicate the "so what" of the presentation. Knowing the "so what" will enable you to find the emotional hook of your topic and to begin to craft the structure and the presentation artifacts to support that hook.



**Meet the Expert: Andy Budd, UX London, dConstruct**

You need to paint a picture in the minds of the audience, allowing them to imagine what the talk is going to be about, why they should care, and what they're going to get out of the experience.

Is it critically important that the audience starts making changes in their day-to-day lives or how they work because of your presentation? Should your audience use your presentation as an introduction to a topic that you want them to further pursue on their own? Or do you just want them to start thinking of things in a new way, perceiving their world from a different perspective that may slowly permeate their actions?

Understanding the "so what," convincing the audience that they should care about your topic, and helping them embark on whatever next steps are important will take your presentation from one of the ambiguous many that blur together in their conference-soaked brains and will turn it into the one that they not only remember, but that they talk about and take action on.

## What to Do?

All of these questions may seem a little daunting. You probably have a lot of ideas and thoughts floating around your head, and it can be difficult to translate them into anything concrete. The more concrete you can be with the answers to these questions, the easier the next phases of creating your presentation will be, and the stronger and more consistent your session will be when you actually give your presentation.

As with many of the presentation preparation subjects we'll walk you through in this book, breaking this task down into some specific steps can be helpful for tackling the work and making it more manageable. Find yourself a quiet spot for about 30 to 60 minutes and try the following:

1.  Using your title and abstract, start writing short phrases that describe what your talk is about. Try to keep the phrases brief, focusing upon the biggest main points of your presentation. From this list, craft one sentence on what you are presenting. Make this sentence as clear and specific as possible—no run-on dangling participles!

2.  Next, spend a few minutes thinking about what you want your audience to remember from your talk. Is there a central concept, methodology, or tip that you want to make sure they grasp? Out of these ideas, prioritize the one thing you want your audience to retain. Write it down in one sentence and consider using this sentence in your presentation.

3.  Write down all of the reasons you are presenting: you always wanted to try it; you think your topic is so awesome that everyone should care about it; you want to get promoted and think presenting might help; you want to become more well known in the industry. Once you have captured your main reasons, spend a few minutes thinking about the order of priority. Which reasons are most important to you? Try to be as honest as you can—no one will see this. Write down your most important reason.

When you are finished, save this work in a place easily accessible from where you will most often be working on your presentation. If you get stuck during the presentation creation process, if you get confused, or if you feel like you have more (or fewer) ideas than make sense for your presentation, review your sentences. They will keep you on track and ensure that you are continually focused on your big idea.

At the end of the day, a presentation is a selling opportunity. You may be selling an idea, you may be selling a way of working, or you may be selling yourself. The better you can define what your perspective is and why it is important, the more the audience will follow along with you and be willing (and even excited!) to buy whatever it is that you are trying to sell.

# Build a Narrative

Humans communicate through stories. Whether they are told sitting around a fire, at a water cooler, in pictures, or in words, stories make up an integral part of our lives. While you may not automatically think of your presentation as storytelling, when you stand up in front of an audience for a period of time to share knowledge and expertise, that audience will instinctively listen for stories. Stories help us relate our different experiences and lives to each other. Told well, stories can trigger a deeper connection with an audience that ensures they will remember you and the points you want to make.

## The Narrative Arc

Any type of presentation is better if it has some sort of narrative. This doesn't always mean that you have to tell a story in the traditional sense, although relating personal stories that align to your presentation's main point can be a compelling

way to gain your audience's interest. But even if you don't tell a personal story, you need to think carefully about the narrative arc and the beginning, middle, and end of your presentation. Let's take a look at the narrative arc (**Figure 4.1**).
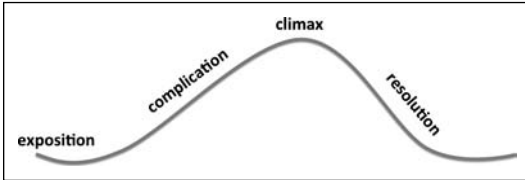


**FIGURE 4.1** The narrative arc

Your presentation needs to have a framework that creates clear markers for where the presentation begins (exposition), how and where the details that are generally in the middle are described (complication), where the turning point or lessons learned occurs, (climax), and where the presentation ends (resolution). This framework will provide it with natural structure, enabling the audience to follow you where you are going and to understand how you got there.

Consider how you will provide the background and description necessary to set the stage for your presentation. Think about the following questions:

- What level of detail is needed?

- How will you engage your audience's interest in the presentation topic?

- Is there is a complicating factor, a troubling issue, or some other tricky situation that needs resolution?

- What is the climax that can serve as the presentation's turning point, where your recommendations and their validity become clear?

Determining the benefit of your recommendations and how they can help successfully resolve a challenge will provide the audience with a satisfactory sense of completion that allows for a straightforward ending to your presentation.

Pull out the sentence you wrote earlier that defines what your presentation is about. This will help you create a clear narrative arc that stays on point and is connected to your topic. It will provide a strong common thread throughout your whole presentation that will ensure that all of your details, side points, or related stories back up that most important goal that you have committed to communicating to your audience.

**Meet the Expert: Eric Reiss, FatDUX**

Storytelling is the key to everything. People remember the stories even if they don't remember the details. I've always thought in stories. This is why a longer presentation is easier for me than a short one. In a longer presentation, I can build the general structure and plan where the stories will come in, and I can adjust the timing as needed on the fly depending on how I tell the stories and how many details I end up including. In a short presentation, I don't have that freedom and I have to rehearse my words, how I'm going to tell the stories, a lot more.

## Provide a Beginning

Whether you plan it or not, the beginning of your presentation is where you create a first impression and set the audience's expectations for the rest of your time on stage. It needs to provide the background and set the stage for your topic. You should introduce any key players or details about the situation that are important to your topic and the later points you want to make.

Consider how you want to introduce yourself and any background or expertise you have with the topic you will be speaking about. Make sure this doesn't come off like an ad for you or your company! Usually one slide and a couple of short sentences about yourself or your expertise with the main point of the presentation is plenty. Your beginning shouldn't take more than about 10% of your presentation time.

Likewise, the rest of the beginning should be crisp and brief. If you start rambling without a point right away in your presentation, you may lose your audience before you even get to the meat of what you want to discuss. As you think about your beginning, make sure that you get the audience into the right frame of mind for what you want them to absorb and take away. You want to pique their interest in your presentation topic and in what you will be sharing, but avoid going into too much detail yet. Think about how much exposition and description you need in order to make your later points or recommendations clear.

## Meet the Expert: Dennis Schleicher, Sears

I usually go through three or four different ways of structuring a presentation. The way I first structure a talk is usually not the way it ends up being structured.

I still like structuring my presentation on index cards and spreading them all out on a big table. I can move whole sections around and see the big picture. It helps me eyeball what I am talking about and if I have balance between the different parts.

It's sometimes useful to think about structuring a presentation like planning a dinner, a five-course dinner—an appetizer, salad, soup, entrée, and a dessert.

And finally, it is helpful to think about what is your hook, or in Spanish *el gancho*. What is on the hook that is going to attract them to pull them in? I think for a while about that and if it makes sense with the structure. A good structure has references to the hook throughout the presentation.

Also consider what you want to ask of the audience. Do you have specific actionable recommendations coming later that you want them to pay attention to? Does a point you make or story you tell in the beginning get repeated for emphasis or progression later on? Depending on your style and the type of presentation, you may want to be explicit in the beginning about what the audience will learn in your time together, or you may want to build more slowly to the climax and resolution.

You may have heard the classic presentation structure tip variously attributed to both Aristotle and Dale Carnegie: "Tell them what you are going to tell them, tell them, then tell them what you told them." As you get started, this formula can be useful for keeping your presentation on track with your important points and can give you a path to follow. As you progress, it doesn't always have to be taken literally. Depending on your personal style that you determined earlier, you may want to use an anecdote, allegory, or even something out of the week's news to introduce your points, repeating them later with other stories or examples for emphasis.

**Meet the Expert: Jonathon Colman, Facebook**

The classical arc is "Tell them what you're going to tell them, tell them, and tell them what you told them." That is, an introduction, then your subject matter and content, and then a conclusion with the things you want them to remember. It holds for most talks, but it's interesting to play with. When I'm working on the structure of the presentation, if I can't watch the movie *Pulp Fiction,* I try to think about it so I can think about playing with time. Could I start in the middle or the end? How can I make the chronology more interesting?

And finally, the beginning of your presentation is where you make your first impression with the audience. Because it can often be where you are the most nervous, it can be useful to establish a stronger and more detailed structure for the beginning that you can easily rehearse. This will allow you to get rolling into your presentation quickly, getting your "presentation legs" under you right away. Most often, the bulk of your nerves will disappear once you get your presentation underway and get past the basic exposition points you make in the beginning.

## Craft the Middle

The middle of your presentation is where you provide the bulk of your recommendations, suggestions, thinking topics, or whatever the key points of your presentation are. A great beginning can capture your audience's attention and a fantastic ending can make them cheer for you when you are done, but the middle is where your substance needs to be; and a presentation without substance will only be remembered for its surface. You want people to remember your content and remember that you helped them absorb that content.

The easiest way to craft an appropriate middle for your presentation is to think about the following questions:

- **How many main points do you want to make?** If you have done a good job at answering the presentation goals questions we discussed at the beginning of the chapter, you should have a fairly well-defined topic that can then be broken out into some natural recommendations or points. For a 45-minute presentation, three to eight points is often most successful, but you might be able to get away with just one or two if your topic is more inspirational. Alternatively, you might be able to do more than eight if your talk is more tactical and instructional.

- **Do your main points have sub- or supporting points?** Or, put another way, are you going to stay big picture and high level and mostly be talking about your main points? Or is this more of a "hands-on" presentation where you want to provide a deeper level of detail? The more main points you have, the fewer sub- or supporting points you will have time for, so think carefully about which points are most important and fit best in the presentation.

- **How complex is your topic?** If your topic is very complex or technical, consider tackling just a couple of main points so that you can go into appropriate depth with the sub-/supporting points and any explanations or definitions you need to provide. It is more valuable for your audience to fully follow along and grasp each of the three points you are discussing than to get lost or overwhelmed and only remember three points from the ten that you talked about.

- **How much time do you have?** You only have a limited amount of time to give your presentation, and while there are occasionally presentations that can be somewhat successful by racing through "50 Tips for Good eCommerce Websites," for example, you will likely get more retention and attention from your audience if you limit your number of points and their depth according to the time slot.

### Don't Overwhelm Your Audience!

I once gave a 40-minute presentation with 12 main points, and each main point had two or three subpoints. In retrospect, that was too many for the audience to digest and too many for me to present well. I found myself rushing and not able to have the freedom to explore some of the more interesting subpoints; instead, I was forced to stick to a rather bland description of each point. It may have been a dense presentation, but I don't think it was a very rich or memorable one.

Also remember that complexity can apply to non-technical topics. In this example, the presentation wasn't technical at all. The topic was more of a big-picture, new-idea one, and I was introducing a number of concepts that were new for many audience members. Simplifying it by reducing the number of points I was trying to cover would have made the presentation more successful and could have left the audience wanting more rather than probably feeling run over by a truck after my dash through all 30 points.

The middle should be the lengthiest section of your presentation and is where you get into the most detail and examples. There isn't a hard-and-fast rule on how much time you should spend in the middle, but a good guideline is that the middle should make up at least 75 percent of your presentation. For example, if you have a 45-minute presentation slot with time for questions included, you will want the middle to be around 25 minutes, allowing 5 minutes for questions, 5 minutes for your beginning, and 10 minutes for your ending.

As you think about the middle of your presentation, pay attention to where you are trying to go; start to envision the end of your presentation so that you can make sure that the middle gets you to your desired ending. In fact, when you start creating your presentation, you may find yourself wanting to head to the ending while you are still working on the middle—this is fine! Just remember to return to the middle for as long as you need to in order to make it the true star of your presentation.

## Get to the Climax

Just like in traditional storytelling, the climax is the high point of your presentation—the place you focus your energy and content toward getting to in order to provide that sense of payoff and reward for your audience. It should be the highest peak of tension within your presentation, where everything you have been building toward culminates into your big idea. It is the peak of your performance, and a strong climax can ensure that your audience remembers you and your presentation.

You may be wondering how you incorporate a climax into what may initially seem to be a dry technical topic. While some presentation topics may more naturally lend themselves to a big epiphany or exciting call to change the world, every well-crafted "big idea'" will have some elements that can be leveraged for your climax. As you work through all of the main points and subpoints that you want to include in the middle of your presentation, answer the following questions:

1. Am I proposing anything new to my audience?

2. Are any of my recommendations surprising or controversial?

3. Was there a turning point in my or others thinking?

4. Was there a problem that needed to be solved?

5. Does my topic include a resolution to a problem?

If you really think about your big idea and how you got there, the answers to one or more of the previous questions should be yes. Next, remember the presentation goals you defined earlier. Pull out what you wrote down for what your audience should be compelled to do after your presentation. Merging your yes answers with what you want your audience to do will provide a strong message that serves as the point of your presentation. Voilà—your climax.

## Define the End

Finally, don't forget to have an ending! One of the most common mistakes that newer presenters make is not having a clear ending that provides a satisfying wrapper to the presentation. Just like the beginning needs to set the audience up for what you are going to talk about and help get their minds in the right place to consume the information, the ending needs to wrap up any loose ends and give the audience something tangible to remember.

As you begin to structure your ending, it's another good time to pull out your answers to your presentation goals questions and remind yourself of what you are presenting, why you are presenting, and why your audience should care. If you have a strong middle to your presentation that sticks to and follows through on all of these promises, the ending will be the place to reinforce all of that work. The ending is often a good spot to explicitly tell the audience the one thing you want them to remember, even directly stating it on a slide, especially if you have a less linearly structured presentation where you may not have stated it throughout.

### Meet the Expert: Eric Reiss, FatDUX

If anything, the end of a presentation—ANY presentation—is more important than the beginning. I generally try to sum up in a sentence or two the main points I hope to have made. And then to give the audience a direct call to action of some kind. As far as possible, I try to motivate and inspire. I want to leave the audience experiencing a high note. I want them to feel that they are part of something and that their input and actions really do make a difference.

This doesn't have to actually happen on a slide. In fact, many ordinary business presentations will end with a "Next Steps" kind of list. But what you actually say can dramatically affect the way in which your audience tackles these next steps. If throughout your presentation you have shown them *why* something is important, you should have no problems hitting the right tone for a memorable, effective finish.

We'll talk in more detail later about how to handle questions if they are encouraged at the completion of presentations for the event you are speaking at, but another benefit of a good ending is that it will set you up for an active Q&A that is separate from your talk. You don't want your talk to fade into Q&A without an actual end to the presentation—this makes you look unprepared and is one of the easiest mistakes to fix.

And finally, when you think about your ending, you want your audience to know that you are done with your points, and that it's time for them to clap. One of the most awkward things in a presentation is when it piddles off into nothing because the speaker either ran out of time or neglected to create a specific ending, and the audience doesn't know if the presentation is completed or not.

It is generally appropriate to finish your closing with a strong statement, question, or call to action (script this if necessary), and then pause for two beats and thank the audience. Make your thank-you heartfelt and sincere—the audience has just watched you on stage for some period of time, and, with all of our diminishing attention spans, this is an accomplishment that we as presenters should be grateful for! Your thank-you signifies that your presentation is completed and cues the audience to clap.

In gymnastics, a brilliant performance from the beginning to the middle can all be for nothing if the gymnast doesn't stick her landing. Similarly, you need a solid ending in order for the rest of your presentation to be remembered in the most positive light. Don't be that man who goes over his time slot and runs into lunch, or that woman who didn't know how to stop talking. Complete your presentation, thank the audience, and wait for some applause.

Stick your ending.

# Create an Outline

When it's time for the rubber to hit the road and your proposal needs to become tangible, pulling together an outline can be your best strategy for identifying the structure of your presentation. For those of you who remember creating outlines in high-school English class with something less than fondness, don't feel too tied down to some official outline format that has all of its Roman numerals in the right place.

An outline is helpful to provide a roadmap for you to follow when you begin crafting your actual presentation (**Figure 4.2**). It enables you to jump into the next phases of creating your presentation fairly quickly, and helps you move toward a completed presentation without getting too overwhelmed with the amount of work ahead of you. Creating an outline helps you get crisp with your main points, and it makes sure that you deliver on what you want your presentation to be about and what the audience will walk away with. It also helps you filter out subtopics that, while appropriate to your topic, don't support the main thing you want your audience to remember.

And the best part about the outline is that it doesn't have to (and shouldn't) remain static. Blowing it up and creating subsequent versions will help you further refine your ideas and find the focus you need to build a solid, well-structured foundation to your presentation.
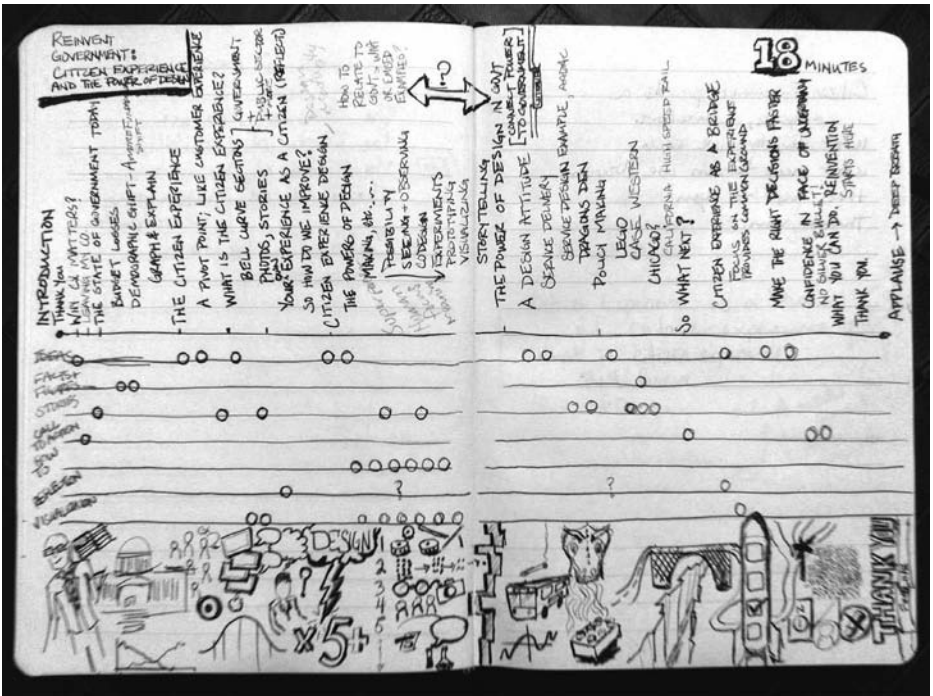


**FIGURE 4.2** An example outline structure

**Meet the Expert: Jess McMullin, The Centre for Citizen Experience**

Structure is the tool that lets your presentation tell a story, make a point, connect with individuals, and inspire your whole audience (**Figure 4.2**). Structure is what connects individual slides and talking points into a coherent whole. And structure helps your presentation's ideas and feelings stick with people after you walk off the stage.

I think about structure like a music score or a recipe. Do I have the right notes at the right time? Do I have the right ingredients, and am I mixing them the right way? Those ingredients are the different kinds of approaches I might use, like sharing an idea, or making a passionate emotional plea, or presenting data or images.

For a new presentation, I start with an outline on paper. Then I check which elements each point supports: Is it about Ideas, Facts and Figures, Stories, Call to Action, How-To Instruction, a pause for Reflection, or an image or Visualization? I track each point in my outline against the kind of approach I might use. Like cooking or composing, I can see if there's too much data for this audience. Not enough stories? Need to pause? This lets me see the flow of the presentation and how I can reach individuals who respond to different approaches, like visual or verbal, facts or feelings.

Finally, I sketch thumbnail ideas alongside the outline to start planning the visual flow of the structure. By starting with structure, using it to plan the mix of presentation approaches, and then sketching, I can tune the presentation to the tastes of the audience and make sure my message connects with individual needs.

## Start Analog

There are a number of reasons to start your outline away from a computer, tablet, or other digital device. Working digitally tends to put people in a certain mindset that has been reinforced by years, maybe decades, of habits and ways of working while "at a computer." Even if you are using a mobile device, which may seem less constraining than sitting in front of a computer screen, starting digital can be too distracting to allow you to get to the level of quietness that drives structural clarity.

Digital devices include fantastic access to all sorts of resources that can help you research and create presentations, but this always-connected access is also what can keep you from focusing on the bones of the presentation, on the map you

need to create to help you get to your presentation destination and ensure that the audience can follow you. This is why you can often make the most progress with creating an outline structure by finding a spot where you can concentrate for a few minutes and just start by putting pen or pencil to paper (**Figure 4.3**).

Don't worry too much at this point about your structure or level of detail; just note your ideas, your main points, and your subpoints. Keep this piece of paper with you as much as possible so that you can quickly jot down ideas as they occur to you in the shower, in the middle of the night, or while watching other presentations. As you work through this, you will eventually find a structure forming naturally that will help lead you to the next stage of a more formal outline.

If you are a more visual person, you may find the space and flexibility of a whiteboard or a big sheet of paper helpful for starting to carve out your structure and outline for your presentation (**Figure 4.4**). Another benefit of the whiteboard is that it can be easier to share with people and to talk them through what you are thinking about. Getting feedback at all stages of preparing your presentation is immensely valuable.



**FIGURE 4.3** Very rough paper notes that will eventually lead to a more structured outline



**FIGURE 4.4** An example of a whiteboard outline

As you start to build in more detail and get to a stage where you are reining in all of your diverse ideas and laying them out into a more defined approach, visualizing your structure can be very useful (**Figure 4.5**). Consider writing down each of your main points and subpoints on separate pieces of paper that you can shuffle around to better see the orders and structures that make sense. In her book *Resonate*, presentation guru Nancy Duarte advocates using analog methods such as sticky notes that can be placed on a wall or the floor to better "see" your structure.

**FIGURE 4.5**  An example of an index card outline

The more clearly you define your structure in these ways, the easier it will be for your audience to also grasp the structure and stay attached to the points in your presentation so that they can put it all together in their own heads and identify with what you are talking about. This flexible analog work can also help you start to tackle your transitions and notice where you can draw parallels and connections between things that you are discussing. These relationships will help solidify the presentation for both you and your audience.

### Determine Your Level of Detail

If you are speaking about anything that's complex or that might be new to your audience (and if you brainstormed properly as described in Chapter 1 you should have at least a new take on a topic), you will want to spend some time making sure that you've presented at the right level of detail. A good way to start this process is to distill the story you want to tell to its simplest form, and then gradually layer on detail and intricacy if needed from there.

Spend time thinking about how you would tell the story to your grandma. Or a child. How would you describe your topic so that each could understand and relate to something in her own life and experience? An additional benefit of this work is that thinking about how to describe something nebulous or technical to an audience who may not have background in the topic will help you focus on the most important aspects and not get distracted.

Don't worry about constraining yourself too much by your outline. Even if you are preparing a presentation that is less linear or that allows for audience interactivity within the presentation, some sort of outline will help you hit your marks and highlight the most important parts within your presentation.

## Move to Digital

Now that you have at least a general outline in analog format, you can start creating a shell of your presentation that will set you well on your way to all of those slides you have been obsessing about. One way to do this is to start by literally moving your analog outline into slides (**Figure 4.6**). It seems like a small step, but often just creating these placeholders will help you transition into what can be a scary part of the presentation process.
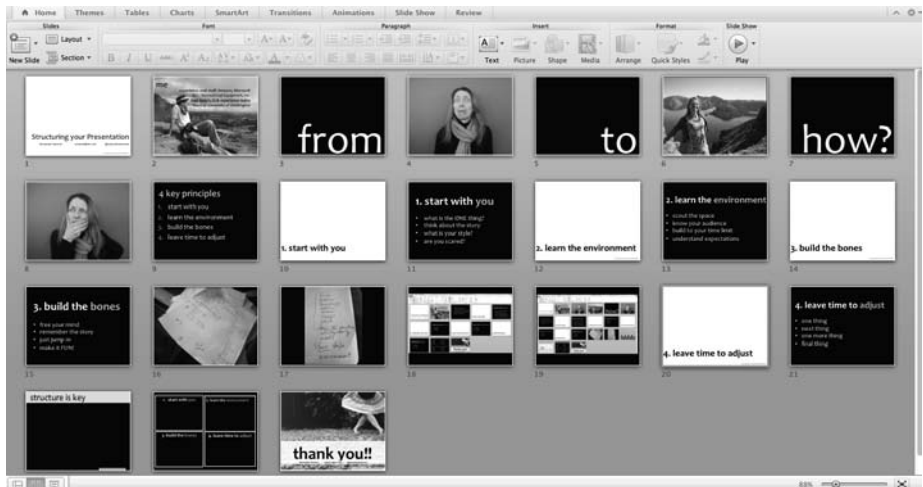


**FIGURE 4.6**  An initial digital outline represented in slides

Once you have created that initial digital outline in whatever format you will be eventually presenting in, you can use it as the foundational structure upon which you build the rest of your presentation (**Figure 4.7**). This will allow you to stick to the structure you have spent time planning according to your presentation goals. What's more, if you keep your initial outline-like slides in your deck at least until the very end, you will easily know when you start to go off track or add too much detail to a particular section, or whether you are missing big chunks.
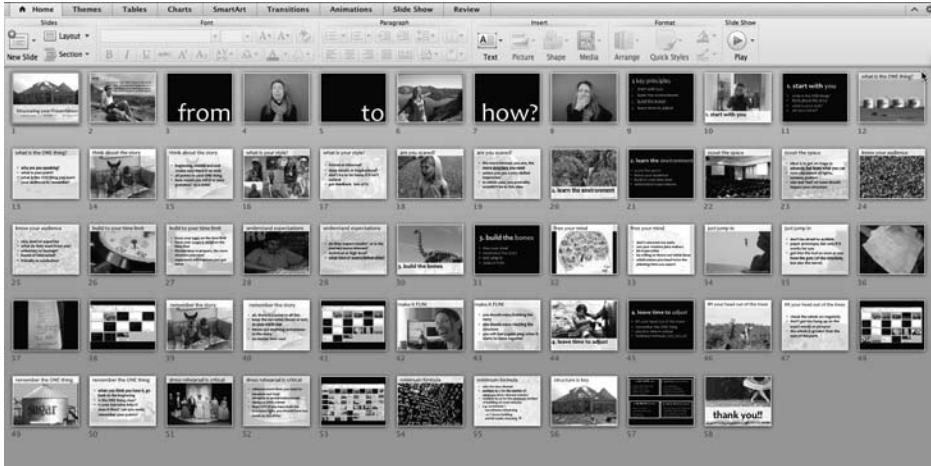
**FIGURE 4.7**  The next version of the digital outline

You may decide to eventually remove all of the slides that "show" your structure—that is up to you, your style, and what will be most successful for your presentation. But keeping them in until you have almost completed your slide deck (or whatever visual tools you are using) for your presentation will keep you honest throughout the process and sticking to your most important points in a smooth flow.

# Ready for Creation?

If you have spent your structure time wisely, the creation of your presentation will be much easier because you have already laid out the scope and narrative and ensured that your main points and any subpoints are on track with your presentation goals. You will have already battled through some of your favorite, but potentially off-track ideas, and you will have put yourself in a great mental state to start cruising through one of the most fun parts of presenting—building the slides.

You will also be well positioned to start getting feedback on your presentation, because rather than a mess of pictures and barely started slides that no outside person can begin to make sense of, you at least have the foundation of your talk laid out in a structured way that makes it much easier to share with people. And while it is nice to hear compliments about the visual aspects of your slides or the

pretty images you are using, the content of your presentation is really what you want the audience to remember. Sharing your outline in its various stages with people who will give their honest perspective will help them stick to providing feedback on the meat of your presentation.

And finally, if the dreaded technical difficulties that all presenters fear and hope to never deal with do happen to you—the projector doesn't work, slides get mangled, etc.—you should have such a strong understanding of your points and overall message that you could give the presentation without slides or notes at all. This means you could even tell your story in a strong and compelling way if you magically found yourself in an elevator in front of your CEO or your personal hero.

And that alone is worth the structure work.

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