

# LIGHTNING TALKS

/ Sharing and learning at lightning speed /

## WHAT ARE LIGHTNING TALKS?

Lightning Talks are a series (usually at least 4 - 5) of 5 minute talks/presentations by different speakers, each introducing a topic or idea very quickly. A set of Lightning Talks is an excellent way to rapidly and compellingly share information about diverse topics from several presenters, without overwhelming the absorptive capacity of the audience. They are very useful when you have many presenters but a short schedule. Some advance briefing is needed for presenters who are unfamiliar with the format. Two popular variants, Ignite and Pecha Kucha, are also described here.

## REQUIREMENTS:

- *Facilitator*
- *Meeting room/ auditorium (for large audiences)*
- *LCD projector and screen*
- *Laptop computer*
- *4 - 5 presenters*
- *Audience (limited by seating space only)*
- *Time: Normally 30 minutes (including transition time) for a standalone session of 5 Lightning Talks, or up to a maximum of 60 minutes for 10 talks during a workshop*



## WHEN AND WHY TO USE

The purpose of a Lightning Talk is to articulate a topic in a quick, clear and insightful manner. Lightning Talks are a great way to efficiently

introduce new projects, give multiple quick progress updates or share pertinent new ideas. Appropriate subject material for a Lightning Talk ranges from the simple (but relevant) to the highly technical.

The presenter has only 5 minutes to deliver key messages, and so typically uses only 3 - 5 slides. The 5 minute time limit creates a sense of urgency, which presenters can and should use to their advantage. It also forces them to be creative with their content and succinct in their delivery. The rapid pace of presentations one after another helps sustain audience interest and makes for a

welcome change of pace from standard PowerPoint presentations.

Lightning Talks are ideal for large conferences and workshops when you have many potential speakers but not much time to accommodate them in traditional presentation formats. A Lightning Talk session can easily accommodate up to 10 speakers in one hour (not including Q&A). A series of Lightning Talks can be among the most memorable portions of a workshop, provided the speakers are sufficiently well-prepared with quality, relevant content. Potential presenters may need support and encouragement in advance in order to have them successfully conform to the requirements of this format.

Other uses for Lightning Talks include:

▲ **Alternative to 'brown bag' lunch meetings.** Instead of a single 30-45 minute talk on a single topic, schedule 4-5 Lightning Talks. Presenters don't have to prepare as much material, and can focus on quality instead of quantity. Moreover, a series of Lightning Talks can be a very good way to break down silos by getting people to share what they work on, and by promoting informal conversations and potential future collaboration.

▲ **Forum for pitching project ideas.** When you want ideas from staff for an upcoming project, campaign or initiative, schedule a series of Lightning Talks, and invite staff to sign up and pitch their idea in 5 minutes. The format encourages a degree of disciplined thinking, without requiring too much investment of time. Popular ideas can be vetted and developed further as needed.



## HOW TO APPLY

### Prepare in advance

- 1.** If this is your first time organizing Lightning Talks in your office or among your constituents, then the newness of the format may make it necessary to convince others of its value before trying it out. **If this is the case, identify a champion** – ideally, someone who has experienced Lightning Talks or a similar format, and who is willing to promote it.
  - a** Ask the champion to start the conversation with a message (email, social platform, or announcement delivered at a team meeting) about the event, conveying enthusiasm and briefly summarizing the benefits:
    - ▲ Getting the main points from a topic quickly and efficiently.
    - ▲ Exposure to a variety of topics and presenters, leading to networking opportunities.
    - ▲ Avoiding the tedium of lengthy presentations.
  - b** The champion should follow up with informal conversations encouraging people to attend.
- 2. Identify presenters.** Target people who are open to sharing their ideas quickly, and who already subscribe to the notion that too many PowerPoint slides hinder knowledge sharing. You can set up an online sign-up sheet, and you can invite presenters by various themes/topics relevant to your event.

**3. Once 4 - 5 people have signed up, provide guidelines to presenting a Lightning Talk:**

▲ Each presentation should consist of a maximum of 3 - 5 slides, with a total of one or two key messages for the entire presentation. (See also 'Tips for success' below for more on slides and presenting.)

▲ Each presenter gets only five minutes, no more.

▲ If your presenters are unfamiliar with the Lightning Talks format or are very much used to making lengthy presentations, they may need additional support. Share with them video examples of presentations made with the Lightning Talks format (or with one of the related formats mentioned below, Ignite or Pecha Kucha; search YouTube to find many examples). Provide them with an example presentation using only few words and 1 image per slide. Ask them to share their presentations in advance, and coach them on how to get them into the required time and format.

**Set up the room**

**4. Prepare a meeting room** with sufficient chairs, an LCD projector and a laptop computer. Preload all presentations if possible, in order to minimize transition time and keep the event moving quickly.

**When you are ready to start**

**5. Introduce the format very briefly to the audience**, e.g. "Now we are beginning a session of Lightning Talks. Each talk will last for no more than 5 minutes, and I will keep

time. We have a total of X presenters, and the entire session will last for Y minutes."

**6. Introduce the first speaker and their topic.**

Keep time during their presentation, ensuring they stick to the 5-minute rule. Remind them with a red card when they have reached the 4-minute mark.

**7. Limit the entire session to less than an hour. If desired, take quick questions at the end, after all the presenters have finished.**

Don't take questions after each presentation; do so only at the end, in order to sustain the forward momentum.

**TIPS FOR SUCCESS**



**For facilitators:**

▲ Keep the number of talks to a maximum of five for a standalone Lightning Talks session. For Lightning Talks during major conferences and workshops, you can have up to 10 speakers in one hour.

▲ Keep a sharp eye on time management during the talks. This is the primary secret of success. Be ruthless in moving people on!

▲ If possible, organize Lightning Talks in thematic sequence, by scheduling talks on similar themes consecutively.

---

### For presenters:

▲ **Use only a few words and 1 large image per slide.** Resist the temptation to cram text into your slides to overcome the 5-minute time limit! Have a pointer to a website at the start or end of the presentation to give your audience more if needed.

---

▲ Even though the talks are short, speakers should follow standard presentation techniques: stand straight, make eye contact, speak clearly, don't read from your slides, etc.

---

▲ Don't consider a Lightning Talk to be a 'teaser' where you can just quickly mention a few ideas in a tantalizing way. Instead you must get right to the heart of the topic and present something solid within the 5 minute limit. Is there something innovative about what you do? Does your work have direct impact on the organization or on a community? Have you achieved remarkable results, or learned something really significant? Present your key idea early in your talk.

---

▲ Tell a story to illustrate your point.

---

▲ Before presenting, rehearse your talk with your slides. Think about delivery, what you will say and how you will say it. Use a timer to ensure you stick to 5 minutes. Practice

standing up straight and speaking with a loud voice. Despite the 5-minute limit, make sure you go slow and steady. Reduce the amount you say to the essentials only.

---

▲ Keep it fun and light-hearted if possible. Your audience will be more receptive to listening and learning when they are in a good mood.

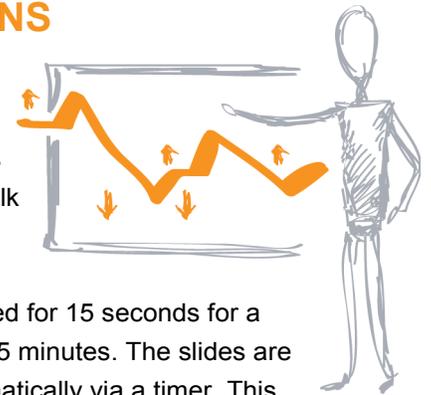
---

▲ Be dynamic to keep energy-levels high, but beware of speaking too fast to cram in everything that you want to say (especially with audiences who may not be native speakers of the language you are presenting in).

---

## VARIATIONS

▲ **Ignite:** This is a Lightning Talk with exactly 20 slides, each of which is displayed for 15 seconds for a total duration of 5 minutes. The slides are advanced automatically via a timer. This makes for a more fast-paced session. Ignite is more challenging for presenters because they must match their words correctly to the pace of the slides, ensuring that they neither run out of time on a given slide, nor have long pauses. If well done, the rapid pace of the slides can make an Ignite session quite entertaining. Rehearsing in advance is even more important than for a standard Lightning Talk. See <http://igniteshow.com/>.



▲ **Pecha Kucha:** This is a very similar commonly used variant, with 20 slides and 20 seconds per slide. Pecha Kucha is a useful format

for project reviews and internal meetings where creative and unexpected ideas are discussed. It can also be used to tell stories about a project or mission; see <http://www.pechakucha.org/>.

▲ **No slides:** If speakers are confident enough, you can also suggest that they forget using slides altogether and present using 'prompt cards', TED-talk style.



## REFERENCES

Byron, Office Barrie. "So, you want to give a lightning talk?" Barrie Byron's blog, <https://barrieyron.wordpress.com/2013/02/17/so-you-want-to-give-a-lightning-talk/>.

Pullen, Noel. "Lightning Talks: Bring your organization closer together in 5 minutes." Hootsuite, <http://blog.hootsuite.com/lightning-talks-bring-your-organization-closer-together-in-5-minutes/>, accessed 27 March 2015.

Ecological Society of America. "Call for Abstracts: Contributed Lightning Talks." *Ecological Science at the Frontier*, <http://esa.org/baltimore/abstracts/contributed-lightning-talks/>, accessed 27 March 2015.

## CREDITS

Author: Meena Arivananthan.

Editor: Eric Mullerbeck.

Executive Editor: Ian Thorpe.

Expert review panel: Kerry Albright, Paula Bulancea, Neha Kapil, Lina Salazar.

Design: Olga Oleszczuk.

Production: Edwin Ramirez.

September 2015.

 UNICEF, 2015

This Toolbox is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/) license, except where otherwise noted.

Contact: Division of Data, Policy and Research, UNICEF  
3 United Nations Plaza, New York, NY 10017, USA  
[knowledgeexchange@unicef.org](mailto:knowledgeexchange@unicef.org)

This Toolbox in its latest edition, as well as all individual tools, are available online for free download at <http://www.unicef.org/knowledge-exchange/>